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The Deconstruction of Patriarchal War Narratives in Svetlana Alexievich's *The Unwomanly Face of War*

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THE DECONSTRUCTION OF PATRIARCHAL WAR NARRATIVES IN
SVETLANA ALEXIEVICH'S *THE UNWOMANLY FACE OF WAR*

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how the Soviet construction of womanhood resulted first in females' active participation in World War II and then in the silencing of women's war experiences by fabricating a reality in which women's trauma did not exist. Such a deprivation of women's agency led to female soldiers' confusion of identity, experience of shame and consequential self-censorship. In *The Unwomanly Face of War* (*У войны не женское лицо*, 1985), Svetlana Alexievich acknowledges these neglected experiences and traumas, and creates a space in which women's stories have a right to exist. Applying Jean Elshtain's theory on the lack of attention to women in combat as well as Carolyn Heilbrun's ideas on the importance of enunciating experiences of oppressed women, I proclaim Alexievich to be a spokeswoman for female war witnesses. I also conclude that Alexievich helps those women abandon their feelings of shame and confusion regarding their femaleness, as she emphasizes that love is the major feminine quality female soldiers possessed during and after war.

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INTRODUCTION

The significance of World War II in Soviet and Russian history can hardly be overestimated. The memory of the war, still central in different forms of cultural production, has become an instrument of politics in the present. In 2012, Russia's President Vladimir Putin famously indicated Russia's lack of "spiritual girders" (*духовные скрепы*), suggesting the absence of a national idea that would hold Russia together. Ever since then, the country's heroic past, with a strong emphasis on the World War II victory, has become one such girder. Thus, in his 2020 New Year's address to the nation, Putin mentioned the 75th anniversary of Russia's victory in World War II as the major forthcoming event of the year. Following the announcement, Putin published an article in English about the war in *The National Interest*; a new Orthodox Christian cathedral dedicated to the Russian Army was opened in June; and the big annual celebration, though postponed, took place on 24 June in the shadow of the coronavirus. The triumphant parade was also purposefully held right before a nationwide vote on constitutional changes that prolong Putin's presidential term of office. Putin manipulates the war narrative in his favor, emphasizing the fact of victory to enhance national pride and cutting out the uncomfortable truths of the war. Putin, however, is not the first leader to make the victory a cornerstone of national identity. There has been a longstanding tradition of using the official narrative of war as a political tool, while downplaying and silencing some of the war's real heroes.

Because I grew up in Saint-Petersburg, formerly Leningrad, remembrance of the war played a big role in my upbringing. When I was at school, every year prior to 9 May we would have World War II veterans come to school and share their dismal war experiences with all the students. Though we had both men and women visit us, I mostly remember the female veterans' stories, always more detailed, more personal, and somehow more tragic: losing their beloved ones, having to kill their own children so that the children would not be shot by fascist soldiers, being rejected after war. Their war was filled with unimaginable losses. At the same time, the women I heard always talked about love and compassion amidst the death and cruelty they recalled. I also remember how every class was asked to collect money and buy groceries for the veterans in our district, and then older students would take the products to their homes. I was happy when it was my turn to visit the veterans, but I was also devastated to see the destitution in which they lived. I always assumed that the food we brought was simply a gift, not needed, but for some of them it was a necessity. I could never make peace with the fact that people revered as some of the nation's finest citizens lived in precarious circumstances without the governmental support they deserved. Because of political manipulation, victory was stolen from those who helped gain it, their lives were significant only once a year, and their voices were silenced.

The Unwomanly Face of War, written by the Belarussian author Svetlana Alexievich in 1985, drew my attention as a possible source of women's stories similar to what I heard in my childhood. In an interview Alexievich explains how the book came to exist: "I had no interest in how many people they had killed or how; I wanted to know how a woman feels. Women tell things in more interesting ways. They live with more

feeling. They observe themselves and their lives. Men are more impressed with action. For them, the sequence of events is more important” (Masha Gessen). Eventually, Alexievich created a space for these ignored voices and revealed the unjust treatment of veterans by writing a women’s history of the war.

Svetlana Alexievich was born in Western Ukraine in 1948, three years after World War II ended, and moved with her family to Belarus after her father was demobilized from the Army. After finishing school, Alexievich worked as a reporter for several local newspapers and received her degree in journalism from Minsk University in 1972. In one of her interviews, though, Svetlana Alexievich confesses that she could not be fulfilled in journalism alone: “Journalism wasn’t that free or interesting of a space ... It focuses on the surface, banalities, events, and I wanted to spend a longer time talking to people in depth, and to ask them about truly important things, like love, death, and war” (Palatella). This realization and the inspiration provided by Ales Adamovich’s book in Belarusian *I am From a Burning Village* (1977), which reproduces testimonies of Belarusian survivors of German attacks on their villages, attracted her to the genre of oral literature, which combined her journalistic skills and her interest in ageless themes.

The writer completed her first book, *The Unwomanly Face of War*, in 1983. Preceded by seven years of collecting interviews and composed of the voices of over 800 Soviet women who lived through the Second World War, the book remained unpublished for two more years, as Alexievich was accused of “pacifism, naturalism and de-glorification of the heroic Soviet woman” (“Svetlana Alexievich – Biographical”). In 1985, the first year of *perestroika*, the book, though in censored form, was finally published both in Minsk and in Moscow, and eventually republished in uncensored form

in 2004. The reception of this book, just like the reception of her other works, was ambiguous: some attacked the writer for dragging the country's heroic history through the dirt, while others applauded her talent and courage to articulate experiences that had long been repressed.

Today, more than two million copies of the book have been sold worldwide. In 2015 Alexievich became the first in her genre to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature, awarded, as the Prize Committee said, "for her polyphonic writings, a monument to suffering and courage in our time." In her Nobel Lecture Alexievich reiterates the mission of her writing: "I'm interested in little people. The little, great people, is how I would put it, because suffering expands people. In my books these people tell their own, little histories, and big history is told along the way" ("Svetlana Alexievich – Nobel Lecture"). For her, the combat women she interviews for the first book are these "little, great people," who deserve to be heard.

The Nobel Prize made Alexievich famous outside of the post-Soviet countries and revived interest in *The Unwomanly Face of War* in her home country and abroad. The first English translation of the uncensored version appeared in 2017, and the book was listed among one of the best books of the year by *The Washington Post* and *The Guardian*.

This study is, first, an attempt to trace the constantly changing image of women in the Soviet Union and the role these changes played in silencing female soldiers after the end of war. The study is concerned with both external and self-censorship and closely examines reasons for both, using Alexievich's book as a primary text. Finally, it regards

The Unwomanly Face of War as Alexievich's attempt at validating the ignored stories and healing the oppressed women.

The first chapter investigates gender priorities in Soviet Russia and the subordination of women's roles in response to the state's changing economic and political realities. The chapter summarizes three major periods in Soviet gender relations. It also examines how the given periods are traced in officially sanctioned posters, a leading form of state propaganda, with specific attention to posters from the war and immediately post-war periods. The posters are viewed as assisting in the silencing of women.

The next chapter introduces a theoretical framework used to investigate female silencing, societal perceptions of female warriors and issues of self-identification. Turning explicitly to Alexievich's text, the chapter reveals that in *The Unwomanly Face of War* Alexievich is concerned with women's intimate experiences of war. It also discusses Alexievich's specific literary style and significance of her gender in creating space for forbidden and forgotten stories.

The last chapter heavily relies on Alexievich's book to explore reasons for women's self-censorship, identifying shame as the major one. It ends with an attempt to reveal the restorative quality of Alexievich's book, as it concludes with emphasizing the quality of redemptive love.

CHAPTER 1

CREATING THE NEW SOVIET WOMAN

No, she's a soldier. She'll be a woman again after the war.

Svetlana Alexievich

FROM EMANCIPATION TO TOTAL CONTROL

Russian gender studies scholar Rebecca Kay summarizes the traditional gender order in pre-revolutionary Russia as “definitions of femininity and masculinity which demand that women be homebound, weak, and dependent whilst men are public actors, strong and independent” (Kay 15). In the immediate post-revolutionary period, the Bolshevik Party set out to reconstruct the aforementioned traditional definitions of gender, attempting to replace the unequal gender relations of the bourgeois family – which was viewed as the primary institution to reinforce gender stereotypes – with institutionalized egalitarianism. As early as 1919 Vladimir Lenin proudly proclaimed, “In the course of two years Soviet power in one of the most backward countries of Europe did more to emancipate women and to make their status equal to that of the ‘strong’ sex than all the advanced, enlightened, ‘democratic’ republics of the world did in the course of 130 years” (122). However, the glorified idea of equality was so closely dependent on the political and economic needs of the state that gender roles became a key principle for establishing citizens’ responsibilities and eventually led back to reinforcing gender stereotypes, in so doing assisting the needs of the regime. The empowerment message was itself a political

tool. The male leaders of the Party needed women to work, so they preached empowerment, but their goal was not so much women's fulfillment as it was the needs of the state being satisfied. Their goal was practical. They needed women to fill certain jobs, and they couched the need in terms of empowerment, which brought more women into the fold and satisfied their female colleagues (who still had less power than their male counterparts).

The alterations of women's roles and acceptable behavior thus became subordinate to economic and political realities of the state and facilitated in the reconstruction of the larger society: as the realities of the state changed, so did preferred women's roles. Elena Zdravomyslova and Anna Temkina, professors of sociology and gender studies, build upon the works of Igor Kon and Gail Lapidus and identify three major periods in regard to the "woman question" (*женский вопрос*) in the Soviet state. The first one dates from 1918 to the beginning of the 30s and is defined as the phase of major liberation through "experimentation in the sphere of sexuality... emancipation from the family, and political mobilization" (98). Messages of emancipation, though conditioned mostly by the need to industrialize the country and the lack of working hands, prevailed. Gail Lapidus, who has studied the woman question in the USSR, asserts in *Women in Soviet Society*: "In the effort to mobilize all available resources for economic development and to encourage capital savings through labor-intensive methods of production and the neglect of the consumer sector, female labor was an important addition to the pool of manpower" (168). Such additions became empowering to the previously uninvolved homebound women.

Historian of Russia Barbara Engel notes in *Women in Russia* that the period was characterized by the democratization of the family, which included easily obtainable divorce, legal abortion, and “allowed a marrying couple to choose either the husband’s or the wife’s surname” (142). The entry of women into the labor force and women’s involvement in public affairs was marked by the organization of the All-Russian Conference of Working Women and the formation of a Woman’s Bureau (*Zhenotdel*) concerned with establishing “a basis for women’s liberation by setting up child care centers, communal dining halls, and other services” (143) and pushed for genuine change on women’s behalf. Men mostly divided into two categories – those who were open to the ideas of women’s emancipation and those who used emancipation to promote the goals of the state. Despite the reasons and the remaining gender bias, the revolution offered women, especially of lower-class, a world of opportunity: “the proportion of women in village soviets [councils] had risen [from 1 percent] to 11.8 by 1927 ... female membership in the Communist Party had grown [from 8 percent] to 13.7 by 1929 ... [The women] worked as administrators, teachers, doctors, lawyers, judges, professors, engineers” (164). Thus, progressive post-revolutionary transformations offered women a shift from traditional confinement to domestic chores, marriage as a union of equal partners, and extensive involvement in the labor force and public affairs.

The second period, which is more relevant to the scope of this research, dates from the early 1930s until the mid-1940s. Coinciding with the first five-year plans, which required an increase of workers in every branch of industry, and the Great Purges, a time of repression and total control, this period was one of much less experimentation. The state is what mattered, rather than personal fulfillment and new opportunities. The period

was no longer as empowering for women and was marked by “strict control, combined with social security guarantees for motherhood . . . used to stabilize the patrimonial, state-determined contract of the working mother” (Zdravomyslova 98). The shift of domestic and private life from the individual to the collective, meaning that family matters became state matters, intensified during the growing political repression and escalating communalization of the period, and individual actions and civic duties became inseparable.

While women continued to enjoy some of the recently offered emancipated aspects, the new womanhood required the revival of traditional aspects as well. Historian Alex Dallin describes women’s double burden of managing motherhood and work: “a woman was supposed to work in industry like a machine [and] she was supposed to give birth like a cow” (390). Yet, the initially ambitious plan for industrialization failed in its promise to create conditions for women to manage their dual civic obligations comfortably, and as a result “women experienced enormous difficulty in meeting the conflicting demands on them to participate in the labor force and look after husbands, children, and home” (Engel 177). The *Zhenotdel* was abolished in 1930 by Stalin, who claimed that equality had already been achieved. This led to the termination of emphatic advocacy on behalf of working women and resulted in the majority of women filling the lowest paid positions. There were sectors of the economy indicated as “female,” including stenography, cooking, sewing, linen, wool, etc., while major investments were redirected to “male” heavy industry. Though the introduction of machinery aided women in overcoming a lack of experience, gender segregation and a hostile environment combined with managers’ biased refusal to replace men with women and male workers’

refusal to train unskilled women to reduce women's opportunities further. The number of childcare centers, though significantly increased by the end of the 1930s, still remained far short of the goals and needs, and a genuine advance in access to maternal and other female health care was still not sufficient, especially for the rural population.¹ Abortion was criminalized again in 1936. Finally, the massive collectivization of agriculture and the abolishment of private trade led to severe shortages of food and basic household supplies. These adverse conditions for working and supporting a family and the government's simultaneous insistence on the normalcy of women's double burden produced an image of the Soviet superwoman who manages to master seemingly incompatible expectations. The constructed image was actively propagated in the media, both aural and visual. This national idea also helped with the mass mobilization of women into the war effort.

The final Soviet period, which includes the post-war recovery and reconstruction of the nation, is known for the loosening of government control of private life coupled with an even stronger emphasis on domesticity and motherhood, caused largely by the large numbers of deceased and wounded soldiers and civilians.² Abortion was decriminalized in 1955 but the government insisted that it was women's duty to reproduce and that domestic work was uniquely female. The majority of the female population continued to hold full-time jobs but were also encouraged to surrender better-paid positions, occupied by women during the war, to demobilized men. Apart from the

¹ By 1939, there were only 7000 hospitals, 7503 maternity homes, 14300 clinics, and 26000 medical assistants in the entire Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (Engel 172).

² About 25 million people were left homeless, 9 million soldiers and up to 24 million civilians were dead, and around 18 million people wounded (Engel 224).

recurring roles of exemplary mother and worker, the first decades of the period were preoccupied with outer femininity, asserting, as one magazine writer put it, that women's "natural sphere of interest lay in how to make the home comfortable, food more tasty, children more healthy and better brought up, and, well, yourself more attractive" (qtd. in Reid 297). These expectations were targeted at both older and younger generations of women: "Magazines intended for teenage girls instructed them to dress tastefully and behave appropriately with boys, warning them against unfeminine behavior such as swearing" (Engel 240), thus employing propaganda tools in mass media in order to naturalize gender roles and identities.

PROPAGATION OF THE NEW WOMAN

The designated periods were influenced by and thus can be traced in various Soviet propaganda forms, particularly officially sanctioned posters. Before considering examples, the reasons for the state's choice of this propaganda form should be considered. Having appeared as early as 1919, the propaganda posters were meant to indoctrinate masses with a radically new type of political organization and with Communist ideology. Considering the economic catastrophe Russia faced during the civil war that followed the Bolshevik takeover of 1917, posters were a perfect fit as thousands could be reached with a relatively small investment. Even more importantly, the Soviet government was facing a high level of illiteracy: approximately 60 percent of the population was illiterate in 1917, and about 80 percent of rural women were illiterate, so, using a visual example was a promising way to reach the uneducated. Poster artists could respond quickly to changing circumstances, unlike other forms of art that took longer to be produced, and posters were a perfect way to reflect the Bolshevik mentality by easily

representing conflict through simple juxtapositions (Kenez 112-113). As the feminist activist Nadezhda Krupskaya, who was married to the Soviet leader Vladimir Lenin, put it:

For the present and in the near future, a peasant can learn to increase his production only if he is taught by visual example. And in general, the peasants, just like the masses of workers, think much more in terms of images than in abstract formulas; thus visual illustration, even when a high level of literacy is reached, will always play a major role for the peasant. (Lee 504)

Soviet poster art gave Soviet women a special place in building the proposed bright future of the nation. The leaders' goal was to convince women that with the new regime they could gain equality and be distinguished as valuable citizens. Officially, Joseph Stalin, who would take power in 1927, was one of the major proponents of the new womanhood, supporting the liberation of women from their traditional roles. In a speech on the fifth anniversary of the First Congress of Working Women and Peasant Women (1923), Stalin clearly identified a new vision of women's position in the state: "The political education of working women is of primary importance today when power has passed into the hands of the workers and peasants ... Women workers and peasants are free citizens on an equal footing with men workers and peasants ... Finally, women workers and peasants are mothers who bring up our youth – the future of our country." His speech reflected the turn that the new government was taking regarding gender roles in the post-revolutionary period and also identified the dual role of a woman – worker and builder of communism/mother and wife – which would be portrayed in propaganda posters.

In keeping with the state's need to increase women in the workforce, along with the genuine desire on the part of women activists to supplement opportunities available to women, the most prominent image in the visual lexicon until early 1930s is the image of a proud woman worker. The new socialist state focused on the proletariat as the victorious class. The workplace became one of the spaces that allowed women to share their achievements with men. One of the first such posters was made by Nikolai Kogout, a prominent Soviet propaganda artist. In his poster "We Defeated the Enemy with Weapons," Kogout portrays male and female blacksmiths on an anvil. The two figures seem to create a harmonious union with one laborer helping the other. The male worker is not necessarily portrayed in a dominant position: the image is one of equality rather than hierarchy. Neither figure is situated in the center of the image; they are positioned on the sides of the anvil, which, in turn, takes a central place in the poster as a representation of Soviet economic capability – the very labor and product are the focal point of the poster. Both the man and the woman play an equally important role in helping the product into being.

One feature that stands out in posters of the first period is that women's bodies are masculinized, suggesting equal physical capability with men and a corresponding right to work. Gender often is only evident because the word "woman" is in a title, or a worker is wearing a dress. Such similarity to men takes away from women's sexuality and emphasizes instead their role as active citizens. The goal is to contribute to the state no matter one's gender.

A shift in imagery happens with the second phase of womanhood, particularly closer to World War II. A widespread theme in propaganda posters of this period is the

portrayal of women as abstract ideals, particularly as Liberty, Truth and Science (all three being feminine nouns in the Russian language). This tendency to abstraction in the representation of women was not foreign to Russian culture, as it recalls female iconography from the tsarist regime. However, the traditional image of woman as Mother Russia, so common in the tsarist period, did not appear in Soviet posters until the beginning of the war.

An example is one of the most famous Soviet war posters, the first war poster with a woman as a single central figure, created in 1941 by Irakly Toidze, a Georgian painter and poster artist. The poster depicts a female figure signifying the Russian Motherland. Toidze was thus reviving a traditional image from tsarist iconography that had been previously abandoned in the Soviet state due to the party's obvious self-distancing from the tsarist past and also its "emphatically internationalist perspective" (Bonnell 71). An image reflecting national identity was not one to be perpetuated officially, until during wartime when with a shortage of male warriors the government saw a crucial need to include women in affairs of state, making them feel responsible for the country's future in light of their distinctive self-association with their homeland: "We were brought up that we and the Motherland were one and the same" (Alexievich, 50). The political slogan on the poster reads "The Motherland is calling!" The woman is dressed in a red robe and her head is covered with a red scarf, emblematic of revolution and the fight for freedom among Soviet women. As a color of the national flag and a predominant symbol of communism, the red of the poster may also be seen as symbolizing a call to further mobilization in a war already bringing bloodshed, a flood of red, to Russia.

And yet, the author chose to portray a middle-aged woman who reflects such traditionally masculine qualities as courage, strength and decisiveness. The woman's gaze is directed straight at the viewer and, as she holds a piece of paper with a military oath in her right hand, it seems as if she is personally calling every single viewer to join the army. The woman lacks traditional feminine characteristics and she also lacks the traditional female-associated theme of peace, suggesting that the terrors of war are making her resort to different values. At the same time, the female Motherland is meant paradoxically to assure viewers of the just character of this war, of the purity of the country's intentions and the nation's sacrifice. Thus, the poster combines both traditional view of womanhood and new values. More importantly, the image is particularly targeted at female viewers. The image emphasizes that the traditional roles of women might be overturned by the pressure of war, and it encourages Soviet women, whose roles were already undergoing shifts in social identity in Soviet Russia, to turn to yet another unexplored role – that of soldier. The poster was successful in attracting women to the military, as recalled in Alexievich's book on several occasions: "These posters we now see in the museums – "The Motherland is calling!," "What have you done for the front?" – affected me very strongly. They were before our eyes all the time" (25). Alexievich's heroines admit their blind trust in the new role Toidze's poster proposed.

Beyond a call to arms and a simultaneous assurance of purity and truth, the multifaceted middle-aged woman in the poster also serves as a symbol of the wives and mothers waiting for their sons and husbands at home, for whom soldiers will want to survive and win. This aspect of Toidze's poster is one echoed in numerous posters of the time featuring the image of an unarmed civilian working to help the front. A poster

created in 1941 by Ivan Astapov and Ivan Kholodov perfectly summarizes expectations from non-combat women in the rear areas: “Comrade woman! Your son is fighting on the frontlines as a hero. And your daughter is joining Russian Red Cross Society! And your help is needed on the home front: dig deeper trenches, run a factory machine. Become a tractor driver instead of men who are now driving tanks. You, sisters-women! You, mothers-citizens! It is time you realized, the harder you work, the sooner the enemy will be defeated.” Interestingly, such posters assume all women to be unarmed and defenseless at the face of war, as if no women were present in combat. Heroic status is attributed only to men, while women are described either as nursing sisters, citizen mothers, or assiduous workers, who are encouraged to believe that their contributions can help bring their male soldiers home sooner.

Indeed, women in these posters are not acknowledged as serving in direct combat, but rather as a replacement of male with female labor for the duration of the war. A number of posters are labeled “Replace!” and have a working woman depicted in it, as women were expected to fill male positions on the home front while men were away serving. Women along with children are also portrayed as defenseless civilians in need of protection against the fascist enemy by the male warriors. One such example is “Soldier, liberate us from fascist’s slavery” (1943), depicting an older woman with her child, captured by the Nazis and standing behind barbed wire. The fire in the background suggests that their village has been attacked and they need to be redeemed by a fearless soldier of the Soviet army. In the war posters if both genders are presented, women are portrayed not as equals but always as subordinate to men: a man as a doctor, a woman as a nurse; a man as a hero, a woman as a thankful recipient of his victory.

As the war's end approached, the message to women viewers changed. A later war poster, "The Victorious Red Army" (1944), abandons the idea of female participation in warfare altogether and unites three other prominent female roles. The woman is portrayed as a loyal Communist worker, holding a hammer and a sickle in her right hand; as a symbol of the Red Army and its heroic salvation of the Russian nation; and as an attractive young woman, a potential wife and mother. The woman is no longer aggressive or sad, but tranquil and positive, looking ahead, as if to a bright future, awaiting the victorious male soldiers to come home from the war. The poster predicts the upcoming victory and foreshadows the next role required from women in a post-war nation – that of comforter to damaged soldiers and mother to future citizens of a country that had just lost a significant percentage of its population.

The Soviet posters employ mutually exclusive ideals for its female citizens, making it impossible for women to conform to all the proposed images. Women are called simultaneously to fight, to stay home, to work in the fields, to nurture the young. The posters thus take on the role of censors and construct a reality in which women's experiences are defined in accordance with a changing official narrative conditioned by the state's political and socioeconomic needs. The official narrative of the wartime posters depicts a suspension of femininity, as women are urged to take on traditionally male occupations, from soldiers to field workers. The immediately post-war posters relentlessly reinstate traditionally feminine images and expected roles for women as mothers and wives. In the process, the post-war posters eradicate interest in women's appalling wartime stories, as a "new normal" is reestablished.

With their stories devalued or negated, women experienced a confusion of self-identification and ended up with self-censorship that augmented the official censorship. Acknowledging the discrepancy between the traditionally unwomanly wartime lifestyle and the newly aggrandized femininity, most women chose to forfeit their memories in exchange for a celebrated vision of womanhood. The renunciation of Russia's audacious female soldiers in the war's aftermath created a sense of displacement for these women, causing them to doubt their own contributions. Many ended up either adhering to the official male-oriented narrative, which lauded the exploits of Russia's male soldiers and ignored those of females, or simply dissociating themselves from any affiliation with the war.

The heroization of war is another aspect where women characterized themselves as failures – neither their degrading stories of physical and mental depletion nor their sentimental recollections seemed to cohere with the image of a heroic warrior. Instead, in the post-war state, motherhood became a way for a woman to self-identify as heroic. Motherhood was viewed more than ever as a social duty and a woman's primary accomplishment, forcing the role of worker and especially of soldier into the background. Established in 1944 and conditioned by the significant decline in the Soviet state's population, the honorary title of "Mother-Heroine" was awarded for raising a large family, a scarcely imaginable expectation for physically and mentally damaged war survivors: "A woman was entitled to become a heroine mother only when she was the biological mother of ten or more children – step-children, adopted children and children who died were not taken into account" (Issoupova 33). Propaganda supported this ideal, as manifested in "Glory to the Mother Heroine," a 1944 poster featuring a tall, broad-

shouldered woman surrounded by her ten children. The poster does not reflect affectionate motherly love towards one's children but rather portrays the mother as a powerful and wise guide responsible for the true communist upbringing of her children. The posters from this post-war period tend to endow women with excessive femininity only during the period of their fertility; as a result, the woman in this poster is deprived of a vividly feminine appearance as her womanhood is defined by being a mother.

Following Stalin's death, as World War II receded into people's memories, concepts of femininity continued to shift. To this day the promoted femininity remains an ambiguous term, both cause and cure of men's emasculation and weakness, a reason "to blame women for social ills not of their making" (Engel 248). It was and still is believed that a tender feminine woman requires more protection and stimulates masculine qualities in a man but eventually softens his traits and makes him weaker (Engel 249). At the same time, men's alcoholism and domestic violence are blamed on women's failure to remain feminine. The constant alteration of gender-specific expectations in a relatively short period led to confused and shifting identities as well as shame at being unable to conform to these incompatible roles. A systemic lack of concern for women's experiences in both traditionally male and female positions resulted in decades of silence and an acceptance of the "double burden" as an integral part of women's life. The position of women who went through war was even more complicated: not only did they need to satisfy contradictory roles, but they also were forced to forsake their participation in the war and build a new identity by sublimating their traumatic experiences.

The Unwomanly Face of War is an attempt to revive and validate the negated female experiences both during and after World War II. In a sense, the author creates her

own posters, which reflect a more encompassing story of Soviet women at war and after war, establishing their femaleness as described by them rather than prescribed to them.

In the next chapter I will introduce a theoretical framework for understanding female silencing, the societal perception of female warriors, and the issue of self-identification. I will look at the significance of Alexievich's gender in being an advocate for oppressed women's rights and enunciating their experiences. I will also discuss Alexievich's specific literary style and how it assists in conveying forgotten stories.

CHAPTER 2

WOMEN IN COMBAT

I want to speak ... to speak! To speak it all out! Finally somebody wants to hear us. For so many years we said nothing, even at home we said nothing. For decades. The first year, when I came back from the war, I talked and talked. Nobody listened. So, I shut up.

Svetlana Alexievich

SILENCING FEMALE SOLDIERS

The Soviet government had no intention of recruiting women before the war, planning rather to have them fill the gap in the labor force created by drafted men. However, as Alexievich's text makes clear, women felt that they had as much an obligation to defend the country as men did. Serafima Panasenko, a combat paramedic, recalls her reasons to leave her home and turn up on the battlefield: "The Motherland was everything, the Motherland must be defended. I didn't hesitate: If I don't go, who will? I've got to go" (Alexievich 30). A patriotic upbringing and the influential imagery of Soviet propaganda caused thousands more women to do the same. Eventually, the Soviet Union had the largest enlistment of women in comparison to other combatant nations in World War II. Their greatest participation was reached at the end of 1943: "they were 800,000 to 1,000,000 strong, 8 percent of the regular army" (Clements 238). Even more women were involved in non-combatant assignments, comprising approximately 43

percent of medical assistants, up to 10 percent of the partisan forces, and 100 percent of nurses (Engel 214).

Women's essential role in the Soviet Union's military success is particularly evident when one considers how blurred the line between fighting and noncombat forces was. However, women's contributions to the front line received little attention during the war and even less afterwards, as the role of woman warrior was hastily overridden with the urgent roles of wives and mothers. Men were portrayed as active participants in the war, who deserved to define it, while women became passive observers of how their stories were inaccurately paraphrased for them. Men's stories became aligned with the official narrative of the heroic soldier, and women's stories were deemed inessential. Alexievich shares her perception of the male position: "The men were afraid that women would tell about some wrong sort of war" (xxiv), and in response women became afraid of sharing anything and chose to abide by the narrative told to them instead of by them.

Jean Bethke Elshtain, a political philosopher famous for her writings on good and evil and war and peace, in her book *Women and War* explores the lack of attention to female war stories by turning to myths of women as Beautiful Souls/Good Mothers and men as Just Warriors/Good Soldiers. She asserts that the Western understanding of war revolves around these constructed prototypical identities, which influence our gender-based expectations, both in times of war and of peace. As "the heirs of a tradition that assumes an affinity between women and peace, between men and war" (Elshtain 4), we allow for these symbolic linkages to overshadow the unfit stories of pacific males and combative women. Besides, this paradigm has made official war narration an exclusively male role: "the men have done the describing and defining of war, and the women are

affected by it: they mostly react” (164). Despite women’s, even if equal, involvement, suffering, and mourning, men remain the historic authors of organized violence:

Because women are exterior to war, men interior, men have long been the great-war story tellers, legitimated in that role because they have been there or because they have greater entrée into what it must be like. The stories of women resistance fighters and soldiers have sometimes been told but have not attained the literary status of the great war novels by men. (212)

Thus, a man who has never actually been to war has more legitimacy and societal endorsement in depicting war than does any woman.

Elshtain suggests that we are accustomed to thinking of women as active agents of peace and passive victims of war. She refers to Joan of Arc as an exceptionally illustrious example of “the ferocious few” in the Western tradition and discusses the reasons for her fame. The philosopher argues that the French heroine whose military leadership was crucial for a momentous victory over the English would not be renowned for her “warring” if it was not for her more “feminine” features: “Her martyrdom figured centrally. So did her virginity” (173). Eventually, her suffering and self-sacrifice, which lead to her sanctification, surpassed her heroic, yet violent acts.

Often referred to as the Soviet Joan of Arc, Zoya Kosmodemianskaia became the prototypical sacrificial female soldier during World War II. The first woman to be declared a Hero of the Soviet Union (posthumously), she was assigned to set afire a village with German cavalry regiment and was eventually captured by the Germans, publicly tortured, and burnt. Repeatedly discussed in the Soviet newspaper *Pravda*, given

new life in a film and a play, “Kosmodemianskaia’s life story was altered to present her as a secular saint and exemplar of communist youth” (Engel 221), stressing sacrifice over her military task. Tortured to death in 1941, Kosmodemianskaia became a symbol of extraordinary resistance and sacrificial death, a model to be followed by other compatriots.

Historian Roger Marckwick regards Kosmodemianskaia’s feat and her “beatification” as a carefully constructed campaign and discusses the necessity of her being a female hero. Marckwick argues that one of the crucial moments in the campaign was the radio broadcast addressed to Soviet youth by Zoya’s mother: “Emphasizing the intimate bonds between mother, daughter and Motherland, this was a mother’s cry to revenge the atrocities inflicted on an innocent daughter ... appeal to masculine, martial values to defend an innocent, ravaged, feminized Motherland and people” (122), diminishing the significance of Kosmodemianskaia’s act and emphasizing the importance of male strength and courage. Another part of the campaign to canonize the female martyr was the photographic record of the young woman’s frozen, half-naked corpse that accompanied the original *Pravda* article. The photo in a sense becomes yet another war-time propaganda poster, depicting physical abuse of female body as a symbol for the rape of the Motherland, meant to infuriate and incite male defenders. The image is employed in other forms of art, including sculptures, paintings, and poems, in which artists juxtapose heroism and femininity and turn Zoya’s body into a sexualized object. One such example is Margarita Aliger’s poem entitled *Zoya* (1942), in which Zoya’s cruel fate is “shown to be all the more tragic because she is not allowed to fulfill her true female

destiny, which, in the Soviet ideology of the times, was to become a wife and mother”
(Hodgson 80):

This girlish body is not dead, and not alive.

It is Zoya made of marble, lying quietly on the snow...

Like a woman waiting for her lover, filled with a precious beauty,

Illuminated from within by a mystical womanly glow.

But you will not see him, bride of the snow

He is dressed in a soldier's greatcoat, he is heading west ...

You are cold, and I am filled with burning anguish.

Because the joy of motherhood never entered your life.

Although Aliger admires the heroine's bravery, these lines suggest that a woman's heroic sacrifice is not fulfilling because it prevents the indispensable heroic virtue of being a wife and mother. In the final lines of the epilogue, victory has Zoya's womanly face but a man is the one who achieved the victory: "He killed enemies, he was a fighter / He held a rifle in his strong hands," making men heroes and women recipients of their heroic actions. Like her French counterpart, Kosmodemianskaia becomes a representation of female purity and martyrdom.

Elshtain also explores the reflections on duty and guilt among soldiers as proposed by the American philosopher Jesse Glenn Gray, who was drafted into the armed forces in 1941. Elshtain compares expectations about soldiering and mothering and concludes:

The soldier is expected to sacrifice for his country as mothers are expected to sacrifice for their children ... The soldier and the mother do their duty, and both are racked by guilt at not having done it right or at having done wrong as they did what they thought was right. Such guilt is not, J. Glenn Gray argues, a personal psychological burden so much as an acute awareness of human freedom and failure to live up to one's ideal of the good. (222)

These ideals, Elshtain argues, are constructed, imposed by the system, and exist in correspondence with the prototypical identities of Good Mothers/Good Soldiers. Women at war find themselves in an ambiguous state of having to live up to both ideals, whether they are current or future mothers. They are caught up in a situation in which they need to merge two incompatible qualities: the "natural" motherly instinct of preserving life and the soldier's assumed mission of killing to protect. The conundrum causes identity confusion and leads to constant guilt about nonconformity to at least one of the roles. When war ends, men as victors experience some sense of accomplishment at being successful in defeating the enemy and protecting the country. For the very reason of having participated in war, however, women cannot attain a similar state of fulfillment, as they are time and again reminded of their failure at being pacific mothers, whether because of killing the enemy, losing their children in war, or becoming infertile after war traumas and stress. The lack of social acceptance of such deviation from the assumed female norm adds to women's feelings of shame, and most choose therefore to obliterate the unfortunate role of a soldier and construct a new identity around "appropriate" qualities.

As we see in the Soviet case, women thus abandoned the identity of female soldier altogether, because they could not find ways to fuse their two identities, wartime vs. female, especially because post-war directives did not offer any point of reference for women's confused identities. Women found it unnatural and virtually impossible for one individual to abide by the two conflicting roles.

Issues of identity for twentieth-century women and proposals on how to construct new role models for them are discussed by the prolific feminist author Carolyn Heilbrun in her 1979 book *Reinventing Womanhood*. Even though Heilbrun does not discuss women in the framework of participation in war, she views the traditional divorce of ambition/courage from femaleness as the root cause of the confusion of female identity. Emancipation, which implies ambition as well as wholeness of character, is unconceivable without the society admitting the conventionally male qualities within the scope of womanhood. The reinvention of womanhood is possible when a descriptive rather than a prescriptive mode is assigned to it, so that female behavior is perceived as autonomous and limitations on actions and destiny are lifted. Heilbrun finds the solution for successful reconstruction in appropriating examples of self-realization as presented by the male world: "Women must appropriate aspects of male behavior to themselves as women, enlarging the scope of womanhood in the process, so that what they choose to do is now defined as womanly rather than manly" (98). It is essential, she maintains, that women's actions are construed on their own terms, independently from their male bases. Heilbrun asserts that society is very selective when it comes to the recognition of female experience and stories, while often the male perspective equals the human perspective: "Just as society assumes the male view to be all encompassing and the female restricted,

so it also tolerates a wide range of behavior in men while insisting on a much narrower scope for women” (88). The paradigm engenders women’s fears of being less of a human, resulting in self-censorship and submissive behavior.

Heilbrun refers to the German theologian Dorothee Soelle and applies her philosophy of suffering in a world of victimization to the situation of women. Soelle proposes three stages of a person’s reactions to suffering. The first phase is mute suffering in powerlessness and often a lack of awareness of one’s situation. Phase two is marked by the victim’s mindfulness and articulation, and the concomitant desire to change the oppressive situation. The last phase, normally reached through solidarity with other sufferers, includes common recognition and actual change. Regarding women’s systemic oppression as constant state of suffering, Heilbrun finds that the proposed stages can be applied to women’s lives and women’s movements, and concludes:

Probably women are the only large group of the oppressed who over the centuries have remained in phase one ... Women have tended not to recognize the pain inherent in lack of selfhood, or, if they recognize it to the extent of responding with general depression and despair, they have been unable to articulate it. It is important to realize that the crucial phase for the majority of women is not three, but two, and it is here that women have notoriously failed: they have not been able to articulate their pain ... often with little solidarity and much opposition from other women. (67)

Heilbrun closely relates the problem of female self-identification and lack of female solidarity with literature as she argues that literary works reinforce the tradition of depriving women of their autonomy: “Women writers ... projected their ideal of

autonomy onto a male character, leaving their heroines to find their role in subservience” (73). She notes that it is usually female writers who deny heroines their autonomy because of their fear of crossing the borders of patriarchal norms as well as the aforementioned convention that the female’s life be seen in subjection to the male’s, allegedly making her experience inconsequential for the audience. Heilbrun repudiates such a concept of female identity and maintains that female experience should be assessed by itself, not in subordination to male experience: “the individual woman must learn to recognize and to value her own experience and to articulate her true condition” (94). To make a change in prejudiced hegemonic masculinity, a female’s experience should be seen as of equal importance by both men and women. Heilbrun goes so far as to accuse female writers of ignorance of a female perspective and passivity in helping other women find their true voices. Interestingly, Heilbrun notes that male writers, especially European ones, are more willing to acknowledge female autonomy and complicated identity in their writing. Unfortunately, the heroine’s autonomy becomes inextricably linked to its male author, however, and becomes a presentation of a male character in a female body, with flaws being attributed to her femaleness and strengths to her maleness. That is why it is essential for Heilbrun that female writers become advocates for oppressed women’s rights. She urges them to assist silenced women in reaching the second phase of articulation by validating and sharing their experiences that had been negated.

GIVING VOICE TO FEMALE SOLDIERS

Taking into consideration Elshtain’s theory on lack of attention to female war stories and Heilbrun’s plea to enunciate women’s experiences, especially if they do not

dare to do it on their own, I regard Svetlana Alexievich as a spokeswoman for female war witnesses, who aims to empower them through giving value to their stories. Her gender plays a key role in this process of empowering because her femaleness, to return to Heilbrun's ideas, does not allow for the female voices of her interviewees to be confused with a male author's voice. In Alexievich's major works, namely her cycle *Voices of Utopia*, consisting of five separate books,³ the Belarusian writer portrays life during and after the Soviet regime. The cycle became the reason Alexievich received the Nobel Prize in literature "for her polyphonic writings, a monument to suffering and courage in our time" through the experience of individuals. The committee reaffirmed the multi-voiced nature of Alexievich's works and her status as a writer who gives voice to previously unheard people.

The Unwomanly Face of War, first published in 1985, is the earliest work in the cycle, and the only one devoted exclusively to women of the Soviet republics. Early in the book Alexievich acknowledges the lack of female stories in the official war narrative and women's mute suffering: "We are all captives of men's notions and men's sense of war ... Women are silent. No one but me ever questioned my grandmother. My mother. Even those who were at the front say nothing... They suffer without words, which is still more frightening" (xv). The writer believes that women's stories deserve to be heard outside of their families and makes it her goal to revive the forgotten and forbidden narrative: "Why, having stood up for and held their own place in a once absolutely male

³ *The Unwomanly Face of War* (*У войны не женское лицо*, 1985), *The Last Witnesses: Unchildlike Stories* (*Последние свидетели: Книга не детских рассказов*, 1985), *Zinky Boys* (*Цинковые мальчики*, 1991), *Chernobyl Prayer: A Chronicle of the Future* (*Чернобыльская молитва. Хроника будущего*, 1997), *Secondhand Time* (*Время сэконд-хэнд*, 2013).

world, have women not stood up for their history? Their war remains unknown ... I want to write the history of that war. A women's history" (xvi). Her assumption is that it is different from the official history.

Considering Alexievich's role as a spokesperson for the silenced women, one should note her specific literary journalistic style: a genre on the border between the documentary and the novel. One possible classification of the writer's style is testimonial literature, which has been defined by scholar George Yudice in the context of Latin American literature but can also be applied to other literatures. Yudice characterizes testimonial literature as follows: "Emphasizing popular, oral discourse, the witness portrays his or her own experience as an agent of a collective memory and identity. Truth is summoned in the cause of denouncing a present situation of exploitation and oppression or in exorcising and setting aright official history" (17). Yet, while Alexievich's work aims to convey the unvoiced truth and opposes the oppression of those whose stories do not coincide with the official history, it does not satisfy another part of Yudice's definition, namely that a narrative is "told by a witness who is moved to narrate by the urgency of a situation" (17). The events described in Alexievich's book, however horrific, occurred in the past, and it is the author who sees the urgency of reviving the stories from the past rather than the witnesses themselves.

A more appropriate classification of the style is proposed by journalism scholar John Hartsock, who views Alexievich as an author of literary journalism and literary reportage, both combining factual reporting with narrative technique. The two differ only slightly in that the former assumes "the inconclusive present" while the latter offers an "unambiguous ideology ... in which a response is prescribed" (41), typically used to state

a writer's critique of the political system. Alexievich composes her narrative of oral accounts decades after the end of the war, but though she refers to the past, her aim is the commentary on and the change in the present.

Alexievich is not the first writer in Russia to work in this genre. Ales Adamovich, Viktor Astaf'ev, Daniil Granin and Viktor Nekrasov are among those who are known for their works in a similar style. Daniel Bush, for instance, unites these authors in the context of the "unofficial" Soviet war writing, noting their common idea that "there was a 'truth' about soldiers' experiences that was under constant threat of mythologization" (217). These authors were determined to create a truthful representation of the country's past, even if the truth was less heroic than what was depicted in the official narrative. In *The Unwomanly Face of War* Alexievich recalls her first encounter with Adamovich's *I am from a Burning Village* and her fascination with a novel composed of testimonies from real people; Alexievich concludes: "Ales Adamovich became my teacher" (xv).

It would not be right, however, to assume that Alexievich simply adopted the form and filled it with the collected stories of her own. A crucial question is if and how she differs from her male counterparts. First, all the mentioned male writers are older than Alexievich and they experienced war firsthand. That leads to the second major difference between their works and *The Unwomanly Face of War*, summarized by Bush: "If Adamovich's question is *what happened?* Aleksievich asks *what did it feel like?*" (217). The men, as participants of war, are concerned with the facts, knowing that some of them had been altered and the history of the victory had effaced the history of the real war. They want the truth they knew to be articulated and supported by other witnesses. Alexievich, however, was influenced by but never lived through the war. She does not

want to revise facts that are already given, wanting instead to hear new stories and details that never had a chance to be told. The objective of her work is the emotional representation of the lived experience, and she fills her book with stories that can contradict the official narrative as well as one another, proving that there is no monolithic truth when it comes to war experiences.

The importance of Alexievich's work lies in her talent for creating the space for such intimate stories and individual truths to emerge: "I sit for a long time, sometimes a whole day, in an unknown house or apartment ... After a certain time, you never know when or why, suddenly comes this long-awaited moment, when the person departs from the canon ... and goes on to herself" (Alexievich xvii). Alexievich is not interested in gathering objective truths about the war; her interest is in the interviewee's subjective perceptions. "For that reason, she does not ask her interviewees about battles and heroism but about small, personal details such as feelings and private memories" (Novikau 318). The oral narratives she collects display the significance of the suppressed stories and in so doing problematize the official discourse of war.

Censors, as evident in the book in short excerpts titled "From a Conversation with the Censor," accused Alexievich of dethroning the heroic women of war with her filthy stories. They suggested that her attempt to rewrite the victorious history was related to her non-acquaintance with real war. However, in her introduction to the very first publication of some chapters of the book in the journal *October* (*Октябрь*, 1984), Alexievich offers her pedigree and personal experience as justification for delving into others' agonizing memories: "But didn't [the war] also touch my life with its deadly breath? We all still belong to the generations which each have their own account with the

war. Eleven of my family members did not survive. . .” (qtd. in Brintlinger 24).

Moreover, I maintain that the very process of writing the book makes Alexievich more aware of her interviewees’ points of view for at least two reasons: she becomes familiar with diverse female war experiences as well as with both censorship and self-censorship. Apart from conversations with a censor, the new edition of the book includes passages that were previously omitted by the censor and those that were left out by the author, demonstrating that Alexievich has been silent to some extent and might still be, if the latest edition is still not the complete version.

In the next chapter I will explore notions of guilt and shame as major reasons for the female war victims to self-censor their stories and discuss how Alexievich’s book attempts to redeem these women from their dreadful experiences.

CHAPTER 3

FROM SHAME TO REDEMPTION

Alexievich attempts to revive the female stories that had been kept hidden previously from public attention by both the state and by women themselves. The government's strategy of highlighting the heroic side of war, along with a reassertion of women's nurturing roles because of inconceivable losses, required the silencing of women's horrifying memories. As early after the war as July, 1945, Soviet leader Mikhail Kalinin addressed the "glorious daughters" demobilized from the Red Army. While acknowledging their contribution in defending the homeland, as well as their psychological and physical strength, Kalinin also stated: "Do not give yourself airs in your future practical work. Do not talk about the services you have rendered, let others do it for you. That will be better" (460). Women were also discouraged from pursuing careers in the military, as they were deemed unsuited for warfare.

Fearful of going against the state's instructions, women did not dare to speak about their military past and implicitly agreed to go unrecognized for their achievements. Moreover, besides this significant external influence on these women, there was a strong internal factor as well that urged them to silence: shame. As discussed in the previous chapter, shame occurs when a person realizes that he or she cannot live up to societal ideals. For the Soviet women who became active participants in warfare, war disrupted their female roles as nurturing mothers and attractive wives. At the same time,

their femaleness was an obstacle in being a good soldier. Thus, their shame was two-fold: they were neither feminine nor masculine enough. Their post-war shame revolved around this conflict.

Psychoanalyst Helen B. Lewis compares shame and guilt and concludes that “the experience of shame is directly about the self, which is the focus of evaluation. In guilt, the self is not the central object of negative evaluation, but rather the thing done is the focus” (30). Lewis believes men to be more prone to feeling guilty, while women experience shame more easily. Lewis states that since women are more concerned with fitting in, rejection or involvement with something that society finds wrong and inappropriate leads women to experience shame. Thus, Soviet women, acknowledging their unfitting position both in the time of war and after it, experienced shame and eventually undermined their own experiences and chose to conceal them, being disgusted more with themselves than with their actions.

The shame is linked in particular to the women’s confused state of wanting to be both more masculine, especially at the beginning of war, and more feminine, especially closer to the war’s end. At the war’s beginning, women faced the belief that they physiologically did not belong in war zones and the army’s unreadiness to adjust male equipment and uniforms to the female physique. Sergeant Valentina Chudaeva notes that poorly fitting uniforms could interfere with women’s operations: “We were issued big, thick overcoats. We were like wheat sheaves in them; we didn’t walk, we waddled. At first there were no boots for us. What they had were men’s sizes” (Alexievich 104). While uniforms are supposed to provide protection and help soldiers succeed in their jobs, inappropriate sizing did the opposite to female soldiers. The size and weight of

ammunition also became an issue for some of the female participants, but they were ashamed of their weakness. Partisan Galina Dubovik remembers: “I carry a handled machine gun on my shoulder ... I’ll never admit it’s heavy. Otherwise, who would keep me as number two? Inadequate fighter to be replaced. They’d send me to the kitchen. That’s a disgrace” (204). Dubovik confesses her shame at the possibility of serving in a traditionally female position while being a part of the traditionally masculine domain of war.

Apart from having to prove to their male counterparts that they could fight and lacking properly sized clothing, women also faced no access to feminine hygiene. Sergeant Maria Kalibedra shares her experience of the biased attitudes towards women in combat and women’s need to prove such attitudes wrong: “And we made greater effort than men did. We had to prove that we were no worse than men” (199). But this also made her realize that nothing could possibly be enough for women to be equal with men:

But how could we be men? It was impossible. Our thoughts were one thing, our nature – another. Our biology... We march, and leave these red spots behind us in the sand ...red traces... the women’s thing. How can you hide anything there? ... Our trousers got dry on us and became sharp as glass ... The army didn’t provide us with anything ... Women’s underwear appeared only maybe two years later. We wore man’s underpants and tank tops. We reach the crossing, and there the shelling begins. A dreadful shelling, the men all hide wherever they can. They call us. And we don’t even hear the shelling, we can’t be bothered. We quickly run to the river. Into the water... We sat in it till we soaked it off ... We were more

afraid of shame than of death. Several girls were killed in the water ... Maybe for the first time then I wanted to be a man. (200)

Thus, unsanitary wartime conditions and the absence of proper clothing, as Kalibedra describes it, became two huge factors contributing to the female feeling of shame. The feeling was enhanced by realization of their difference from the already superior male soldiers, who did not face the issue of finding appropriate clothes or sanitary pads and did not account for female trouble. Kalibedra's story reveals women's discomfort with discussing the forbidden topic of menstruation, and how this discomfort drove some women literally to death because of their desire to erase proof of their femaleness, and correspondingly of their shame.

The menstrual taboo is discussed by the feminist theoretician Elizabeth Grosz in her book *Volatile Bodies*. She asserts that menstrual flow is regarded with "shame," "disgust," and "the powers of contaminating" (206), because it is associated with female's inability to control her own body: "Menstruation, associated as it is with blood, with injury and the wound, with a mess that does not dry invisibly, that leaks, uncontrollable, not in sleep, in dreams, but whenever it occurs, indicates the beginning of an out-of-control status that she was led to believe ends with childhood (soiling oneself)" (205). Menstruation makes a woman view herself as inferior to men, who are perceived as always in control of their bodies. It also perpetuates women's fear of being less of a human (Heilbrun 88) since the male body and experience are considered normal and universal, while female unique experiences "are positioned as essentially deviant or pathological" (Dolezal 107).

Historian Melanie Ilic remarks that the topic of menstruation was covered in the Soviet Union in some of the official educational books for girls, yet any talk about menstruation was considered distasteful. Soviet concealment of menstruation is evident in *The Unwomanly Face of War* when Alexievich's interviewees replace the word "menstruation" with a supposedly less "distasteful" euphemism "women's thing" (Ilic 98). The topic was considered inappropriate even between mothers and their daughters, so family physicians were usually responsible for informing young girls about changes in their bodies. Thus, it was often the case that teenage girls were confused and sometimes terrified by their first experience with menstruation. Considering that the youngest female soldiers recruited in the military in World War II were 15 years old, some of them had their first menstrual experience on the war front. Albina Gantimurova, a sergeant major, shares her embarrassment of having to find out about menstruation from a male war paramedic, an older man: "He told me everything about it, like a father ..." (Alexievich 38). She shares this story after she states that the whole war was filled with the constant feeling of shame.

However, the desire to be a man and shame at menstruation were soon overturned by the desire to return to traditionally feminine behaviors and appearance, as well as by a concern with longer-term fertility, as some had stopped menstruating altogether during the war. So, paradoxically, both the presence and the absence of menstruation became reasons for the female experience of shame. Specifically, the very absence of menstruation did not embarrass and disturb women as much as the possible implication that they could be infertile. Pilot Alexandra Popova shares with Alexievich: "The body reorganized itself so much during the war that we weren't women ... We didn't have

those women's things ... Periods ... You know ... And after the war not all of us could have children" (195). Popova thus identifies two issues produced in women by loss of menstruation – temporary confusion over their gender identity and long-term infertility.

Psychologist William Petok considers shame an inevitable aspect of the experience of infertility, relating it to a “sexual failure” (46), defectiveness, and losing control over one's body, characteristics very similar to how menstruation affects female psychology and self-perception. Petok also concludes that women are more prone to experience internal shame and self-judgement in response to infertility. Soviet women in combat, who could not know for a fact if they were infertile, experienced shame from the very possibility of it. The chance at not satisfying the encouraged role of mother after the war induced fear and shame in women long before the war ended. The shame was doubled by their fear that low reproductive value could make them undesirable for men, thus, depriving them of “woman's destiny” of being a mother and valued wife.

Clearly, mere survival was not the only goal fearful female soldiers had. Apart from reproductive health concerns, chance of disfigurement became even more appalling than death. Women were right to have that fear, considering the country's post-war neglect of its disabled veterans, particularly women. The Stalinist mythologization of the war required denial of evidence of the tragic war, including disabled soldiers. Officially, approximately 7.5 percent of the Red Army's survivors were disabled, but those who could resume their jobs were not included in the official figure (Baker 80). Disabled male veterans were erased from posters, monuments, and parades, but at least they took a central position in wartime and postwar literature, including Alexei Tolstoi's “The Russian Character,” (“Русский Характер,” 1944), Nikolai Pogodin's *Creation of the*

World (*Сотворение мира*, 1945), and Vanda Wassilewskaia's *Simply Love* (*Просто любовь*, 1944). Historian Anna Krylova discusses the elevation of traumatized male soldiers and the silencing of female soldiers' trauma in the literature of the period. She notes that the literature is characterized by balancing "troubled male personalities with physically whole and psychologically integrated women" (310), who would be unable to heal men if they had been traumatized themselves both psychologically and physically. Literature reflected the reality – war disability was constructed as a problem of men, not women, because they were meant to become a solution for the problem.

The fear of being left incapable was worsened by the fear of becoming "socially unmarriageable" (Baker 85): a disabled woman was thought to be un-nurturing, unattractive, and unfit for intimate relationships. Not to say that men were not afraid of becoming disabled, but women assumed that it would be much harder for a woman to find a spouse in case her body was disfigured. "What is it for a man? Even if he loses his legs, it's not so terrible. He's a hero anyway. He can marry! But if a woman is crippled, it's her destiny that's at stake. A woman's destiny..." (Alexievich 187). When women thought of the possibility of disfigurement, they did not think of their bodies as their own property, but rather as something that would in future belong to their husbands. Tamara Umnyagina, a medical assistant who witnessed the fighting at Stalingrad and dozens of limbless helpless male soldiers, remembers her feelings towards them: "We carried them on stretches, but they were in agony. I felt like marrying any one of them" (327). Umnyagina's response to the male soldiers' mutilation was a desire to look after them and become intimate with them. At the same time, she confesses that she hoped that it would never happen to her body and nobody would ever see her this way: "I began to

hide my legs and face during battle. I had pretty legs; I was so worried they'd be mutilated. And I worried for my face" (Alexievich 327). She assumes that if the same happened to her, men would not have same positive response to her mutilated body. Pre-war gender order made it clear for younger girls and older women that female disability would become a threat to their social personhood, comparable to death. Sniper Klavdia Krokhina, who at the age of twenty-one returned from war grey-haired, recalls the words of her mother: "I asked one thing of God, that if they disfigure you, better let them kill you" (Alexievich 11). The mother, however, did not have the same concern about Klavdia's brother, who was at the front, assuming different perception of male and female disability.

Fear of becoming crippled and stories about disfigured female bodies echo throughout the book, yet there is only one direct testimony of a disabled woman, Thecla Struy. As a partisan, she was wounded in the legs and lost consciousness, resulting in frostbite and amputation. The surgery took place right in the forest "with a simple saw ... without anesthesia" (272). Struy recalls her immediate reaction to amputation: "I wept ... I sobbed ... I imagined how I'd go crawling on the ground. I wouldn't be able to walk again, only crawl. I myself don't know what helped me, what held me back from ..." (272). What seems to have hold her back from an alleged suicide attempt is that she was appointed a vice chairman of the district party committee – "a big job," which encouraged her to move on: "Back then I ran around town and went everywhere on foot. I ran around on my wooden legs; I traveled to the kolkhozes" (273). Still, her disability played a critical role in her "woman's destiny" and hindered her from becoming a mother and a wife: "It's a big house, because there are no children in it ... I live with my sister.

She's my sister, my mama, my nurse" (273). It is Struy's sister, a female, who takes on a role of caretaker and "soul-healer" (Krylova, 324), normally assigned to Soviet women to look after male mutilated veterans. Thus, the only woman in the book who openly talks about her disability, even though it negatively affects her personal life, is a faithful Communist who occupies a traditionally male position and conforms to the political vision of the state. This proximity to the post-war expectations for male veterans makes Struy's non-conformity to the prescribed female roles less unacceptable and less shameful.

Confused by the unpromising changes in their bodies, women decided to nurture their feminine side, which was greatly reflected in their appearance. Klara Tikhonovich, an anti-aircraft gunner, reports this shift: "Did we want to resemble men at the front? At first we did, very much: we cut our hair short, we even changed our way of walking. But later, no, no way! Later we wanted to put on makeup, we saved sugar, instead of eating it, to stiffen our bangs. We were happy to get hold of a pot of water to wash our hair" (Alexievich 197). One might suggest that a female soldier's fixation on outer beauty amidst war can be viewed not as vanity, but as an expression of another traditionally feminine quality – the aspiration for peace. Women realized the impossibility of putting an immediate end to the ugliness of war, but at very least they could manage their own unattractiveness, which gave them hope for a brighter future. For instance, Stanislava Volkova, commander of a Sapper platoon, shares her preposterous story: "The woman I stay with brings me two eggs ... Quietly, so that she didn't see, I broke those two little eggs and cleaned my boots. I was hungry, of course, but the woman's instinct won out – I wanted to be pretty" (190). Volkova's decision to waste insufficient food to alter her

looks emphasizes her rebellion against the monstrosity of war. Aware and tired of the dirt and ugliness of war, the least she can do is clean herself, even if it means wasting food.

Another factor to fuel women's self-shaming was their involvement in violent actions of war, including killing, which moved them even further away from their role as peacemakers. Political scientist Paige Eager assesses social perceptions of women involved in violence and claims that acceptance follows only in a very limited number of instances, namely "fending off an attacker, especially a rapist, defending her children, fighting back against a terribly abusive husband, some sporting activities" (Eager 3). A woman who is involved in violence outside of these exceptions, is viewed as "less than a woman" (3). Women engaged in combat are only accepted to some extent, when it is necessary, but the role of mother and warrior cannot be reconciled.

Even though women took professional pride in the accuracy of their marksmanship, their stories reveal a lack of acceptance decades after the killings had been committed. Partisan Valentina Ilkevich, for instance, sees the discrepancy between the violence she had to commit and her dream job: "I didn't want to kill, I wasn't born to kill. I wanted to be a teacher" (Alexievich, 258). There is also an assumption that it is unnatural for a human, especially for a woman, to be engaged in killing another human being. Zinayda Vasilievna shares same opinion: "It was a pity, even though he was a fascist ... You see, I didn't want to kill. There was such hatred in my soul: why had they come to our land? But when you yourself kill, it's frightening ... Very frightening" (147). Some of the women explicitly state that using a gun and killing is distinctly an unwomanly activity. Thus, sniper Maria Morozova claims: "It's not a woman's task – to hate and to kill. Not for us... We had to persuade ourselves. To talk ourselves into it"

(10). Armorer Elena Zvyagintseva shares a similar opinion and goes even further to say that men are prone to find fascination in weaponry, but she sees women as different: “I’ve seen the admiration of men looking at a fine pistol; I find it incomprehensible. I’m a woman” (319).

Even women’s belief in the justness of the cause did not help women cope with the shame and fear caused by the act of killing. One woman who worked as a waitress in a German officers’ canteen remembers how she was assigned to kill them: “I was supposed to put poison into the soup cauldron and leave for the partisans the same day ... they were the enemy, but I saw them every day ... It was hard ... To kill is hard ... To kill is more terrible than to die ...” (xliv). Her story confirms that direct involvement in killing another human being, even if you do not witness their death, is devastating; it is not necessarily about firing the lethal bullet with your own hands, it is about knowing that you caused someone’s death. The acts of killing are juxtaposed with the act of compassion and kindness to the enemy: “I, who swore I hated them all ... I gathered from our soldiers all they had left of their rations, any piece of sugar, and gave it to the German children ... I remembered everything but I couldn’t calmly look into their hungry children’s eyes” (304). Such narratives rewrite the heroic myth of black-and-white war and reveal women’s mixed feelings towards their own actions. They also, as the result, create a twofold feeling of shame: first of letting emotional womanhood to affect women’s judgment, and secondly of not being able to conform to the categorical paradigm of wartime.

Contradictory emotions are also evident in one of the most shame-associated and uncomfortable topics for the interviewed women – sexual relationships. Alexievich

recalls the reticence with which the female veterans talked about their relationships with male soldiers in war, “as if they were protecting themselves” (225). Even if they chose to share a “forbidden” story, they wanted for the story to get out but preferred to remain anonymous: “If one of them resolved to be totally sincere, if a desperate confession escaped them, there was always a request at the end: ‘Change my last name’” (225), considering their behavior “indecent.” It was usually not romantic love that women refused to discuss but forced relationships with higher-ranking officials to escape sexual assault from other soldiers. The fear and shame around this topic are linked to the tradition of wartime male impunity and female chastity.

Susan Brownmiller, the renowned feminist author of *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*, maintains that rape is not about sex but about the empowerment of men and the shaming of women. Women are put in a position where expectations of their chastity diverge with ideals of masculine behavior, which is in the desire to aggressively vanquish female honor: “Man’s structural capacity to rape and woman’s corresponding structural vulnerability are as basic to the physiology of both our sexes as the primal act of sex itself [...] When men discovered that they could rape, they proceeded to do it” (13-14). Brownmiller also asserts that the act of rape against women has long been ignored and even encouraged, particularly in war, relating it to the permissiveness of killing:

When killing is viewed as not only permissible but heroic behavior sanctioned by one’s government or cause, the distinction between taking a human life and other forms of impermissible violence gets lost, and rape becomes an unfortunate but inevitable by-product of the necessary game called war. Women, by this reasoning, are simply regrettable victims – incidental, unavoidable casualties. (69)

Though Brownmiller only considers civilian women and women of the opposing nation, the same framework may be employed to show how Soviet women in combat were treated by male counterparts. The only woman in *The Unwomanly Face of War* who dares to raise the topic of rape and sexual impurity but refuses to give her full name is Sofya K-vich, a medical assistant, who was the only woman in her battalion. The woman chose to be a field campaign wife (*походно-полевая жена, ППЖ or PPZh*) to the commander of the battalion, even though she knew he had a lawful wife on the home front. Her decision, however, was not conditioned by her feelings towards him but rather out of danger of being raped by other male soldiers. It was safer to have one “protector” who would require sexual favors, than to be constantly threatened by persistent suitors:

I'm not afraid of telling the truth ... I was what's called a field campaign wife. A war wife ... A second one. An unlawful one ... I didn't love him. But I went to his dugout after several months. What else do I do? There were only men around, so it's better to live with one than to be afraid of them all. It was less frightening in battle than after battle, especially if we pulled back for a rest or re-formation ... After the battle each of them lies in wait for you ... You can't get out of the dugout at night ... Did other girls talk to you about that or did they not confess? They were ashamed, I think. (235-236)

Sofya acknowledges that despite the compelled character of such relationships, women were ashamed of their unlawful status of a field campaign wife, perceived as immoral behavior. They were also terrified of the violent invasion of their female bodies by male soldiers, and the shame for such violent behavior was also experienced by them, possible victims, rather than by potential sexual predators. Sofya remembers fending off

importunate soldiers in a common dugout: “I used to wake up at night because I waved my arms – I’d slap on the cheek, or the hands, then another” (Alexievich 236). She also recalls that she was so accustomed to protecting herself at night that when she later was wounded and got into a hospital, she still waved her arms. Woken up by a floor attendant, Sofya did not dare to explain to her why she was so aggressive in her sleep. The fear of being misunderstood and mistreated for their interaction with male soldiers, whether it included any intimacy or not, led to the women’s silence on the topic of sexual relationships.

The experience of shame in response to rape took place even if a woman was not a direct victim. Such situations particularly took place when the Soviet army entered Germany. Soviet female soldiers found themselves confused as they wanted simultaneously to take revenge on the German army by dint of hurting their women and also to stop the ongoing suffering and bloodshed. The Soviet male soldiers sexually took advantage of the German civilian women, considering them a trophy of war, “in the name of victory and the power of the gun” (Brownmiller 80). Women’s non-interference with the act of sexual violence contradicted the nurturing and protective feminine nature, even as proximity to the act made the Soviet women identify with both assaulters and victims. And even if in the beginning the men’s actions were fostered, in the long run the brutality of rape and the acknowledgment of one’s passive complicity in the immoral act induced women’s remorse and self-reproach. A. Ratkina, who also refuses to give her full name, recalls her mixed feelings towards the actions of male counterparts:

I remember ... Of course, I remember a German woman who had been raped. She was lying naked, with a grenade stuck between her legs ... Now I feel ashamed,

but then I didn't. After several months ... Five German girls came to our battalion ... To our commander. They were weeping ... The gynecologist examined them: they had wounds. Jagged wounds. Their underwear was all bloody ... They had been raped all night long. (307)

While the woman confesses to not being ashamed at the moment of assault, she evidently feels guilty for her complicity and uncomfortable sharing the story decades later: "Don't record this ... Switch off the tape recorder ... It's true! It's all true!" (307). Ratkina also reveals that the belated shame of the Soviet women in the battalion led to their compassion towards the wounded victims: the Soviet female soldiers proposed shooting those who had committed assault, once they were recognized by the German women. The Germans, however, refused to partake in such reprisal because "they didn't want more blood" (307), and, consequently, the Soviet women failed at executing justice, which only added to the shame they felt for not having been supportive enough. Thus, the women did not blame the aggressive men for their violent actions but rather blamed themselves for not preventing the actions or penalizing the guilty.

Sexual shame, imposed both internally and externally, intensified when the war was over. If during the war female soldiers were unprotected from sexual abuse, after the war they could not help but face social stigmatization. Despite the government's calls for women to go to war, the common assumption among many Russians was that a woman would not go to war if it was not for the sake of attention from male soldiers, and, thus, the status of a female veteran implied her deliberate sexual impurity. The sexual availability of female soldiers became a reason for criticism in the early stages of war, but the combat women became especially exposed to it when re-entering the civilian life.

Postwar insults and slander mostly came from women in the rear, especially those whose husbands had been mobilized. Every woman at the front was viewed by them as a potential *PPZh* to their husbands. Historian Brandon Schechter discusses the *PPZh* status as the embodiment of negative aspects of women in combat and their alleged privileges: “Some medals, such as ‘For Battle Services’ came to be knick-named ‘For Household Services’ or ‘For Sexual Services’ and associated with *PPZhs*” (par. 30). Schechter also suggests that one of the reasons why women in the rear were so disapproving of the women in combat was envy that the latter had access to men, “a very rare commodity” (par. 37), and had a better chance at fulfilling their duty to be a mother.

Post-war patriarchal society shamed women for being unsuccessful at protecting their purity instead of blaming men for their infidelity and sex offenses. The shaming was mostly produced by women, verifying their compliance with the norms of patriarchy. After her research on women’s indirect aggression Dr. Tracy Vaillancourt concluded that “suppression of female sexuality is typical for women, not necessarily for men” (14). The males would most likely encourage women, other than their wives, to be promiscuous, while females scorn explicit sexuality of other women:

Sex is coveted by men. Accordingly, women limit access as a way of maintaining advantage in the negotiation of this resource. Women who make sex too readily available compromise the power-holding position of the group, which is why many women are particularly intolerant of women who are, or seem to be, promiscuous. (14)

Vaillancourt believes that not even the fact but the suspicion of promiscuous behavior is enough to start stigmatizing purported wrongdoers, especially when women want to

compete over men's attention. Similarly, Anne Campbell, a specialist in evolutionary psychology, suggests that women's aggressive competitiveness follows from their desire and need to be exceptionally valued by the men. The aggressiveness is, however, restrained by women's disposition to safety and self-defense, which makes them think of other types of abuse rather than physical:

One way women can compete without risking their safety or compromising their lives is through acts that ostracize, stigmatize, and otherwise exclude others from social interaction without risking direct physical confrontation. Such acts ... inflict stress and diminish the opponent's reputation and social support. (17)

Suppression of female sexuality and aggressiveness came from Soviet women who had remained on the home front and saw female soldiers as competitors for men's attention. Postwar scarcity in the male population along with the reviving cult of domesticity intensified female competition and relational aggression. Civilian women reinforced the paradigm in which they, as healers of wounded soldiers, were juxtaposed with impure and damaged military women. Constant insults and public humiliation, especially if men were present, aimed to expose female soldiers as unfit for being wives or mothers. Such denigration erased any heroic actions of women in combat and left them slandered, shamed, and often alone.

Klavdia S-va, a sniper with two Orders of Glory and four medals, recalls how the joy of victory and expectations of a bright future quickly overlapped with a harsh, unfair postwar reality:

How did the Motherland meet us? I can't speak without sobbing ... It was forty years ago, but my cheeks still burn. The men said nothing, but the women ...

They shouted to us, “We know what you did there! You lured our men with your c——! Army whores ... Military bitches ...” They insulted us in all possible ways. (Alexievich 249)

Klavdia confirms female active participation in aggressive interactions as well as the shame experienced by the objects of this aggression. She also brings up the issue of male passivity towards insults from civilian women. One possible way to interpret such behavior is men’s suppression of their own experience of shame (Lewis 56).

Acknowledging that female soldiers’ alleged sexual immorality was in large part the result of male soldiers’ sexual impatience, the male veterans wanted to justify themselves by shifting the blame onto the female veterans. Men’s passive complicity with the civilian women’s verbal and emotional abuse made them unaccountable for any sexual misconduct. Female veterans, in turn, became the only unprotected victims of assaults. Tamara Umniagina refers to the period of such accusations and helplessness as another war: “We’d had enough, we frontline girls. And after the war we got more. After the war we had another war. Also terrible. For some reason, men abandoned us. They didn’t shield us. At the front it was different. The boys protected us” (Alexievich 329). Lack of men’s endorsement allowed for the stigma to exist and silenced the female victims.

The Unwomanly Face of War, though dedicated to female veterans, includes several male witnesses. One of them, Alexievich’s fellow traveler on her way to Moscow, commander of a sapper battalion, shares his memories of postwar reactions to female soldiers:

The war ended, and they all turned out to be terribly defenseless ... Take my wife – an intelligent woman, but she has bad feelings about girls who were in the war.

She thinks they went to the war to find husbands, that they all had love affairs there. Though, in fact, since we're having a sincere conversation, they were mostly honest girls. Pure. (76)

The man confirms the groundlessness of women's mistreatment but also his reluctance to prevent it. He acknowledges the female soldiers' purity before Svetlana Alexievich, but he never confronted his wife with the same affirmation and, thus, men's silence fortified the silencing of female veterans. The man also avows the reason for male veterans to choose wives among civilians rather than among frontline girls: "After the dirt, and lice, and death ... We wanted something beautiful ... We wanted to forget the war. And we forgot our girls, too ..." (76-77). These words reiterate the idea of female soldiers' unmarriageability because of their incapability to cure the wounded souls of male soldiers. The shame and pain from women's deviation from the image of nurturing wife is traced throughout the book.

Valentina Chudaeva, happily married herself, laments the destiny of her female friends from the front: "But those girls are almost all single. Unmarried. They live in communal apartments. Who pitied them? Defended them? Where did you all disappear to after the war? Traitors!" (111). She appeals to male soldiers who abandoned their female counterparts. Her words also reveal military women's postwar financial dependence on men. During the war, most civilian women rose to well-paid positions in factories and state institutions. Even though not all of them could keep these positions after the return of the more favored male veterans, they were guaranteed work thanks to their wartime experience (Engel 228). Unlike them, military women, who were discouraged from pursuing careers in the military, were inferior in the workforce, and mostly occupied

poorly paid positions. Thus, marriage for most female veterans was not only an emotional and social need but also a financial necessity. As a result, many women chose marriage over their military past: “Try telling it, and who will give you a job then, who will marry you? We were silent as fish. We never acknowledged to anybody that we had been at the front” (Alexievich 109). Thus, they had to constantly suppress their traumatic experiences, especially if they concealed the truth from their husbands.

Sergeant Ekaterina Sannikova shares the experience of being the only demobilized unmarried woman in a communal apartment. Sannikova recalls how women in the apartment always assumed that she “whored around there with the men” and expressed their disrespect with actions: “They used to put vinegar into my pot of boiled potatoes. Or add a tablespoon of salt” (237). She also shares a story of her short-term unhappy marriage: “My commander was demobilized. He came to me and we got married. We went and got registered, that’s all. Without a wedding. And a year later he left me for another woman, the director of our factory canteen: ‘She wears perfume, and you smell of army boots and wraps’” (238). Sannikova’s war service turned into the cause of her husband’s infidelity, their divorce, and her loneliness. While supposed to be a reminder of her heroic feats, the experience became an obstacle to her fulfilment in being a wife, and, thus, a reminder of her failure.

Being a mother was the only quality in a woman more commendable than being a wife: “Women’s most praiseworthy postwar activity became bearing and rearing the nation’s soldiers” (Engel 223). Women who did not have children after war, either because of their infertility or because they never found a husband, or even because they never wanted children, experienced internal shame and external contempt. However,

women who managed to give birth also were not alienated from experiencing shame because of their perceived failure at being good mothers. One of the reasons to see themselves as bad mothers was single motherhood. Sofya K-vich, who took a role of a *PPZh* on the frontline, while she had not loved her first wartime husband, did develop strong feelings for her second companion. She expected to become a single mother, knowing that her lover planned to return to his lawful wife and two children after war. She confesses to loving and being grateful to the father of her child, who abandoned her when the war was over: “At the end of the war I got pregnant. I wanted it ... But I raised our daughter by myself, he didn’t help me. Didn’t lift a finger ... The war ended, and [his] love ended ... But I loved him all my life, I’ve kept my feeling through the years” (236). Sofya’s shame is complex: she feels guilty for continuing to love the man unconditionally and realizing that his presence made war the happiest period of her life; she also feels guilty that her daughter had to grow up fatherless because of Sofya’s emotional decision; finally, she feels guilty sharing her love story with Alexievich, afraid of ruining her daughter’s reputation. Sofya K-vich’s self-reproach is based on her belief that she inflicted societal biases against her illegitimate daughter by putting her own desires above her daughter’s well-being, even before her conception.

Klavdia S-va shares a different story about single motherhood. Unlike Sofya, Klavdia got married to a factory engineer and had two children after war and did not expect to be left alone. She found motherhood to be “a woman’s happiness” (249) and always aspired to be a nurturing mother. She first gave birth to a son, an intelligent and successful architect. Her daughter, however, was born with intellectual disability and has not been able to properly speak, read, or write. By the time Alexievich interviewed

Klavdia S-va, her daughter had spent forty years in an insane asylum. Klavdia's husband could not put up with the daughter's condition and hastily left the family: "The girl was born ... He looked at us ... He stayed for a while and left with a reproach: 'Would a normal woman have gone to the war? Learned to shoot? That's why you're unable to give birth to a normal child.' Maybe he's right? I sometimes think so ... It's my sin ..." (250). Not only did not the husband stay with the family, but he also blamed Klavdia and her war experience for the child's disability, thus, compelling her to believe that it was all her fault. John Bowlby, a developmental psychologist, confirms that parents experience an uncontrollable internal shame after giving birth to an unhealthy baby: "Even with insightful care parents, especially mothers, may be burdened by a sense of shame at not having been able to give birth to a healthy infant" (122). By suppressing his sense of shame and fully shifting it onto his wife, Klavdia's husband doubles her shame and her responsibility. His reproach leads Klavdia to believe that her participation in war ruined her chance at being a respectable mother and wife. Her experience turns into her sin, which needs to be silenced and prayed for rather than enunciated. Klavdia's daughter becomes a reminder of her sin and a representation of her alleged failed motherhood.

Bowlby also discusses "guilt at having failed to care successfully for one who died" (122), especially if at birth or in the early stages of life. Valentina Ilkevich remembers a story of a desperate mother whose four children had been shot by German soldiers and who killed her last child: "Only one remained, a nursing baby boy. A fascist pointed at him: 'Toss him up, I'm going to shoot him.' The mother threw the child so as to kill him herself ... Her own child ... So the German wouldn't have time to shoot...She said ... she couldn't live in this world after that" (Alexievich 258). Failure to protect her

children from death and active involvement in killing of her last child do not simply produce shame but are equated to the woman's own demise.

War experience also induced a sense of shame in mothers who already had children by the beginning of war. The shame was usually associated with having to abandon their children with someone else and missing a significant part of their childhood. Antonina Bondareva, a senior pilot, followed her husband to war and left their daughter with his sister. Bondareva's husband died in the first months of the war but she remained in combat till the end, often thinking about her daughter: "I cried, knowing I wasn't the one telling her fairy tales at night" (Alexievich, 289). Returning from war to her daughter turned out to be harder than she expected because her ability to parent was called into question: "And after the war, when I was demobilized, [my sister-in-law] didn't want to give my child back to me. She told me something like this: you can't have a daughter, since you abandoned her when she was little and went to war. How can a mother abandon her child?" (288). The question Bondareva's sister-in-law poses suggests the incompatibility of military duty with the duty of motherhood. For Bondareva, becoming a good soldier meant sacrificing being a good mother, and regaining the position of good mother meant erasing having been a soldier.

Thus, women's military duty always is presented as incompatible with the urgent roles of attractive wives and nurturing mothers. Involvement in violent actions, disfigured bodies, infertility, and compelled or supposed sexual immortality are all contributors to women's failure at being good wives and mothers. Unable to forget their war experience altogether, women soldiers are constantly overwhelmed with a sense of shame and displacement. The silencing of female stories, apart from depriving these women of a

well-deserved honor, also consolidates the belief that their past is shameful and irreconcilable with their female present. Accordingly, the goal of Svetlana Alexievich's book is not only to give credit to women's contributions to the war effort, but also to affirm their war experience as authentically feminine, because in lacking this affirmation a great sense of shame was imposed on female soldiers.

Alexievich starts the book by identifying her motivation behind writing yet another book about war. She makes it clear that she is not interested in military actions and tactics but in intimate experiences of the suffering of war. She distinctly differentiates between the "man's" and the "woman's" voice of war – the former is sensible and precise; the latter is sensitive and soulful – and prefers to write about and with the neglected latter voice. The author focuses on the emotional aspect of this voice: "I write not the history of a war, but the history of feelings. I am a historian of the soul" (xxi). Alexievich believes that the range of feelings of "women's" war is what makes their stories unique and so she attempts to evoke intimate feelings in her interviewees.

The range of the speakers' emotions calls for a reciprocal range on the part of the listener. As Alexievich shares her reactions to the conversations, she lists various feelings, including fear, admiration, curiosity, and shock, yet concludes with the one that plays a vital role to her: "There is only one path – to love this human being. To understand through love" (139). Alexievich adheres to reacting to all the stories with love, which leads to understanding and acceptance. Encompassing love becomes Alexievich's gift to the female veterans, because it eradicates any judgement and shaming of their past and grants them emotional validation.

The peculiarity of Alexievich's polyphonic literature is that while individual speakers may conflict with one another and are not judged by the authorial voice, the authorial voice unifies them around one idea. In *The Unwomanly Face of War*, love becomes this centerpiece. As Alexievich approaches each story with love, she also endows each female speaker with definitive feminine love. This approach aligns with Alexievich's childhood memories of female war survivors: "What I remember most, is that women talked about love, not death" ("Svetlana Alexievich – Nobel Lecture").

Alexievich accentuates the quality of love by the way she positions stories in the text. Thus, "Telephones don't shoot ..." is one of the central chapters and the longest chapter dedicated to a single individual, attracting readers to pay closer attention to it. Valentina Chudaeva, the speaker in the chapter, emphasizes the state which helped her survive in and after the war:

But we were warmed by the feeling of love. People somehow needed people; we all needed each other very much then ... there was a lot of love in me, a lot of joy. That's how I understood life, that's how I wanted to live after the war. God didn't make us for shooting, he made us for love. (110-111)

Chudaeva juxtaposes love with the violence of war and proclaims the former to be her dominant emotion. She does not focus on romantic love only, but includes self-love, love of life, of neighbors and family. Chudaeva emphasizes the surviving and healing power of such encompassing love.

The last chapter of the book is also dedicated to one person – Tamara Umnyagina. Umnyagina enunciates what Alexievich thus situates as the major message of the book: "There can't be one heart for hatred and another for love. We only have one, and I always

thought about how to save my life” (331). Umnyagina suggests that contradictory feelings of hate and love coexist in a heart of one person, and one must choose to be guided by either of these feelings. Her words are reassuring, suggesting that the contradictory roles of violent soldier and affectionate mother can coexist in one woman, without excluding either of the roles. Like Chudaeva, Umnyagina responds to the violence she has experienced on more than one front with acceptance and a faith that love is what enables a woman to survive. Svetlana Alexievich accentuates these ideas by placing them in the book’s conclusion, so that she can define female veterans through love and with that grant them the right to independently describe their femaleness in all its complexities.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

Women's roles in Soviet Russia revolved around the political and economic needs of the state, while women's actual needs were unaccounted for. The first decade of the new state, the decade of experimentation, became the most empowering period for previously homebound women. Even though subordinate to economic and political realities and needs of the state, women's position and status underwent some drastic changes. The period was marked by the shift of women's responsibilities from the private domestic sphere to the public sphere, previously assigned to men. Unlike their Tsarist predecessors, female citizens of the new state became extensively involved in public affairs and the labor force. The following decades, however, encouraged the return to traditional gender roles, emphasizing and naturalizing female domesticity, attractiveness and motherhood. Women were expected to be fully involved in the domestic sphere, while also keeping their full-time jobs.

Officially sanctioned posters were meant to assist the government in reinforcing the changing expectations for women and to instruct women on how to behave properly. Posters issued at the beginning of the war generated appropriated versions of Mother Russia, which unlike its earlier Tsarist predecessors, possessed such traditionally masculine qualities as aggressiveness, courage and steadfastness; the posters were

targeting female viewers to join the army. The immediate post-war posters, however, abandoned the idea of female's participation in warfare and reinstated traditionally feminine images and expected roles for women as mothers and wives. Women who had recently returned from the front either trusted the official narrative or feared going against it, and most of them chose to exchange their war memories for a celebrated vision of womanhood, presented to them as "ordinary women's happiness" (108). They were silenced but never forgot their experiences.

Alexievich recalls how hard it was to break through to personal memories instead of official stories:

More than once afterward I met with these two truths that live in the same human being: one's own truth driven underground, and the common one, filled with the spirit of the time ... The first was rarely able to resist the massive onslaught of the second. That would make it impossible to break through to her personal impressions; I would immediately discover strong inner defenses. Self-control. Constant correction. And a pattern even emerged: the more listeners, the more passionless and sterile the account. To make it suit the stereotype. (88)

The problem was two-fold: women got accustomed to concealing their truths out of fear of the totalitarian state, and the official story was so strongly imposed on them that it made them doubt the truth of their own experiences and contributions. These two reasons resulted in a confusion of self-identification and self-censorship.

Alexievich's goal was to create an atmosphere in which women would feel comfortable enough to dig into their memories and permit even the most sensitive stories

to enter the public realm. Her other goal was for the ignored stories to be validated, if not by officials then at least by the interviewees. Women who acknowledged the discrepancy between their “unwomanly” wartime lifestyles and the lauded femininity and judgmental reactions from civilians in the post-war period grew ashamed of their military past. They assumed that if the stories of their suffering had never been told, that must mean that they were too disgraceful to be told.

Alexievich attempts to give women the right to speak even if their experiences do not conform to the prescribed femininity. Alexievich expands the official narrative: she does not want to portray war as exclusively heroic but as cruel, destructive, and unsparing; she also does not want to limit women’s femaleness to prescribed images but allows them to describe their own femaleness. Thus, each of their experiences, however divergent from traditional femininity, deserves a place in the women’s lives. By framing her book in such a way that the notions of love and acceptance wrap up the final chapters, Alexievich accentuates their importance not only in the lives of interviewees but also as redemptive qualities for a given culture. Granted that both Russia and Belarus are exploiting the World War II mythology in solidifying the *скрепы* and do not seem to be going to change this direction in the foreseeable future, it is beneficial to discover the feminine side of this grand narrative. This approach would not only restore historical justice, which has been long overdue, but would provide post-Soviet societies with a needed fresh take on issues of cultural identity, national sovereignty, and gendered narratives.

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