

## 4.3. The End of the “Great Utopia”: Svetlana Alexievich’s *Secondhand Time*

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### **Abstract**

Svetlana Alexievich’s *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets* is a testimony-based novel about absence, denial, disillusion and, above all, the aspiration for ontological and political liberty. Conceived as a requiem to a key political figuration of this greatest of human ideals, it looks back from recent times of ideological disenchantment and confusion, delving into people’s memories of the Soviet regime’s glory and demise. In addition to comparing *Secondhand Time* with the other four books that comprise the author’s pentalogy dealing with crucial historical features and periods of the Soviet Union’s political and social experience, my essay will focus on the narrative strategies used in the novel to highlight and denounce the paradoxes, absurdities, illusions, and machinations that subverted and led to the collapse of the utopian project of building a social order governed by socialist ideas.

**Key words:** epic novel, oratorical novel, epic chorus, utopia, Soviet Union

Radical and reactionary live together as in an unhappy  
marriage,  
Shaped by each other, dependent on each other.  
But we who are their children must break free.  
Every problem cries out in its own tongue.  
Track like a hound the marks truth leaves behind!  
TOMAS TRANSTRÖMER, 2006

The Portuguese version of *Secondhand Time* by the Belarusian writer and journalist Svetlana Alexievich, the only one of her books to have been published in that country at the time she received the 2015 Nobel Prize for Literature, contains a “conversation conducted by Natalia Igrunova” (Aleksievich, 2015: 459–469). This paratext, incorporated into the work’s epilogue, performs an important editorial function, that of familiarizing readers with the general tone, aesthetic motivation, and narrative programme of Alexievich’s literary output concerning the “Great Utopia” of the twentieth century; that is, the inaugural attempt in the Soviet Union to create the “new man”, as envisioned by Marx and Lenin, the two names associated with the Russian Revolution that would be enshrined in what became communist ideology.

Adopting what we might term a tragico-prosaic register, Alexievich fashioned the five books of her “Red Encyclopedia”, the first of which, *The Unwomanly Face of War* (1984), delivers epic, horrifying testimonies of what her female compatriots experienced and suffered during the Second World War. The second volume, *Last Witnesses* (1985), takes the same theme forward with Soviet children as the main protagonists and witnesses. The third work, *Boys in Zinc* (1989), is based on the recollections of young Soviet soldiers fighting against the Taliban in Afghanistan. The fourth, *Chernobyl Prayer* (1997), tells of the tremendous political and ideological outcomes, and dire public health and environment consequences resulting from the explosion of one of the reactors at the Soviet nuclear power station at Chernobyl — a placename that came to universally symbolize all the uncontrollable and unpredictable dangers associated with the use of nuclear technology and the power it unleashes. Finally, the novel for discussion in this essay, *Secondhand Time*, focuses on the social and cultural impact of another collapse, that of the political empire known as the Soviet Union (Alexievich, 2017).<sup>1</sup> Each of these five books documents the impact of catastrophic human actions that have resonated powerfully in the history of the contemporary world, all of them having the Russian people as their primary collective protagonist. Alexievich has remarked in an interview:

If you look back at the whole of our history, both Soviet and post-Soviet, it is a huge common grave and a blood bath. An eternal dialogue of the executioners and the victims. The accursed Russian questions: what is to be done and who is to blame. The revolution, the gulags, the Second World War, the Soviet-Afghan war hidden from the people, the downfall of the great empire, the downfall of the giant socialist land, the land-utopia, and now a challenge of cosmic dimensions — Chernobyl. This is a challenge for all the

living things on earth. Such is our history. And this is the theme of my books, this is my path, my circles of hell, from man to man. (The Conversation Series, 2015)

In response to one of Natália Igrunova's questions, Svetlana explains that, in her writing, she foregrounds the Russian people because of the high incidence of tragedy and multiple forms of suffering it has experienced: "It is ingrained in deep-rooted Russian culture that we are a people of sorrow and misery. Go through the countryside and have a talk in any hut. What will they talk about? Only about misfortune ... Suffering, struggle and war, such is the experience of our life and our art" (Aleksievich, 2015: 465, my translation).

The tragic national fatality documented in her books has a metonymic function, becoming — by virtue of its illustrative quality — a contiguity, a resonance, a referential value with the propensity to have itself associated with other historical, political and national circumstances. It is almost as if, through her "cycle of books on utopia", there pulsed narrative material so essential and so universal, so eminently serviceable for purposes of comparison, evocation, and extrapolation that these books' discussion of the impact of the madness and the excesses of the Soviet political experiment could clarify or prefigure the reasons why such things had happened or might happen in other places and times. So great is the books' capacity for exemplification, the accuracy and reliability of their scale of measurement, and their value as models for conferring meaning on such events. Both retrospectively and prospectively, the effect of reading Svetlana's novels tends to fulfil the cathartic function which great tragic literature can have for those citizens who voluntarily participate in the cultural *polis* that is fuelled by our critical consciousness of the weight of history, the ideological illusions of our times, and the myths shaping our future. This is why Svetlana's book on Afghanistan, *Boys in Zinc*, was read in France in the light of the Algerian War, while in the USA, it was 9/11 that resonated most strongly for its readers. It is why *Chernobyl Prayer* inspired in France a theatrical trend aimed at alerting people to the potential for nuclear catastrophe in any one of the nation's many atomic reactors, and why in Japan the book was re-edited in the immediate aftermath of the disaster at the Fukushima nuclear power plant.

The term "catharsis" (from the Greek *kathairein*, 'to cleanse, purify') seems entirely appropriate for defining the aesthetic reception of Svetlana's literary works, above all by her Russian and Belarusian compatriots. For in classical Aristotelian poetics, catharsis is used to describe how Greek tragedy gave its audiences the opportunity to sublimate their feelings of terror and pity, and thereby cleanse themselves of the passions they felt in everyday life. However, if we are to define the conditions under which the author produced her novels, rather than how they were received, we should employ the term "mimesis", another

classical concept theorized by Aristotle (drawing on Plato) with a view to characterizing the specific nature of tragic drama. “Mimesis” has been repurposed (with the appropriate theoretical updates and revisions) so that the mechanisms of all literary representation can be made explicit. Aristotle’s dictum was “art imitates life”, justifying the extent to which literature should be concerned with verbally depicting the world. In turn, Alexievich’s novels can be best understood if we appropriate the Aristotelian concept of mimesis and use it to describe a form of literary discourse whose aesthetic reception consists mainly of a cathartic effect.

Both Alexievich’s writing technique and the genre in which she addresses the reader owe a debt to the highly innovative form of the novel discovered and developed by the Belarusian writer Ales Adamovich — the so-called “collective” or “oratorical novel”, the “novel of evidence” or “epic chorus”, a narrative mode that combines thematic content from a plurality of diverse testimonies about real events, and whose expressivity adopts a tone of orality and is devoid of rhetorical flourishes. “Over a long period, I sought a genre”, Svetlana says, “that would let me write the way my ear heard. And when I read [Adamovich’s] *Out of the Fire*, I understood that this was possible” (Alexievich, 2015: 463, my translation). Alexievich’s books display the same oral register, the words of others transcribed in rhythmic cadences and with apparent stylistic simplicity, yet structured using the demanding narrative technique of free indirect discourse. *Secondhand Time* deploys this technique in exemplary fashion — at least, as far as it is possible to judge from reading António Pescada’s Portuguese translation — allowing her to achieve the mimetic representation her cathartic purpose requires.

Born in 1948, Alexievich came to know, internalize, and adhere to communist ideology as an infallible, redemptive doctrine, inscribed in the objective laws of human development. Her disenchantment with the doctrine and the critical posture towards it grew, progressively permeating her personality, as the utopian scope of the communist project was increasingly refuted by the contradictions, absurdities, injustices, and evils of its real-world application.

In the introductory chapter to *Secondhand Time*, “Remarks from an Accomplice”, the author suggests rather than states that her option to “listen to all the participants in the socialist drama” was not intended to vilify the Soviet Union but to write a requiem for a political regime and an economic and social system whose final account has to be tallied not only in the light of the historical context in which they operated, but also by comparison with the regime and system that succeeded them. The touchstone of this before-and-after comparison has to be the idea of freedom, an element key to Alexievich’s research, which allowed her — albeit in an asymmetrical manner — to establish a crucial distinction between those generations of her fellow citizens who were

born during the time of the Soviet Union and those who were born after. When asked “What is freedom?”, there could have been no greater contrast between the answers given by the parents and children she interviewed: they were simply “people from different planets”.

For the fathers, freedom is the absence of fear; the three days in August when we defeated the putsch. A man with his choice of a hundred kinds of salami is freer than one who only has ten to choose from. Freedom is never being flogged, although no generation of Russians has yet avoided a flogging. Russians don’t understand freedom, they need the Cossack and the whip. For the children: Freedom is love; inner freedom is an absolute value. Freedom is when you’re not afraid of your own desires; having lots of money so that you’ll have everything; it’s when you can live without having to think about freedom. Freedom is normal. (Alexievich, 2017: 18)

*Secondhand Time* is a narrative assembled from myriad testimonies, each a variation on the themes of absence, denial, illusion, or the generalized aspiration to experience freedom that was conceived as something between an apologia and an execration, a requiem for the political manifestation of this supreme human value. It is a narrative that limits itself to the remembrance of the rise and fall of the Soviet regime from the later standpoint of ideological disenchantment and disorientation. Put another way, it is a double continuum, or a diptych, both of its panels similarly painted to capture every shade of distinction from the brightness of hope (at one extreme) to the darkness of tragedy (at the other). At the polar extremes, we find, respectively, the utopian projects of creating the just, egalitarian, and communist “new man”, and that of nurturing the post-Soviet liberal, democratic, and consumerist Russian. This continuum structures and gives shape to *Secondhand Time* on various thematic and discursive planes, distributed over the twenty stories that make up the two discrete parts of the book, the two movements of the requiem. The two panels of this diptych are respectively entitled “The Consolation of Apocalypse” and “The Charms of Emptiness”. Each part is delimited by a ten-year period. In the first, it is 1991–2001, the decade of the Gorbachev and Yeltsin administrations, bracketed by the August coup that precipitated the end of the Soviet regime and the end of attempts to create a democratic regime and a market economy in the Russian Federation. The second period, 2002–2012, covers the years in which

Putin installed and consolidated his increasingly authoritarian regime, in which the economy came under the domination of oligarchs while society struggled against mounting inequality. For each decade, Alexievich provides ten micro-narratives, arranged not chronologically but kaleidoscopically, according to a logic that emphasizes the contradictions and paradoxes of the play of light and shade suggested by the “double continuum” and in the titles of the two halves of the book. These testimonies have titles such as “On the Beauty of Dictatorship and the Mystery of Butterflies Crushed against the Pavement”, “On Brothers and Sisters, Victims and Executioners ... and the Electorate”, “On the Sweetness of Suffering and the Trick of the Russian Soul” and “On the Old Crone with a Braid and the Beautiful Young Woman”. The title of each story, juxtaposing utopia and history, nostalgia and disappointment, idealism and pessimism, freedom and repression, tragedy and farce, courage and betrayal, hope and disillusionment is imbued with symbolism and irony by a semantic vector that oscillates between two narrative possibilities closely associated with the two decades: those stories which are told against a red interior and those recounted in the absence of any interior whatsoever.

The former stories reflect faith. For example, Vassili Petróvich says “I want to die a communist. That’s my final wish” (205). He is aged 87, a party member since 1922, and a victim of Stalin’s purges in the 1930s. They also reflect the communist concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat. “And what had we been before that?” Marina Tikhonovna asks a neighbour of Aleksandr Porfirevich, a retired cabinetmaker and former Soviet deputy who, suffering from depression and alcoholism, set fire to himself aged 63 because he had lost both his wife and his reason for living according to communist ideals. She answers her own rhetorical question:

Enemies of the people ... Kulaks and kulak sympathizers  
... In our village, all of the best families were subjected to  
dekulakization; if they had two cows and two horses, that  
was already enough to make them kulaks. They’d ship  
them off to Siberia and abandon them in the barren taiga  
forest ... Women smothered their children to spare them  
the suffering. (Alexievich, 2017: 94)

The second type of stories, narrated with no interiors whatsoever, are those that, having freed themselves of the historical influence of that universe of red faith and red terror, express — devoid of any concern over ideological realignment or reorientation — the axiological drift and moral corruption caused by the dissolution of rigid mechanisms of Leninist and Stalinist indoctrination. As inform-

ant Alisa Z., an advertising executive, says in the narrative “On a Loneliness that Resembles Happiness”:

These days, few people go weak in the knees for love. Everyone saves their strength for the leap forward! For their career! In our smoking room, the girls gossip about their love lives, and if any of them has real feelings, everyone feels sorry for her — like, what an idiot, she’s head over heels. ... Moscow travel agencies offer these kinds of clients special entertainments. For example, two days in prison. ... Then they dress them up in prisoners’ uniforms, chase them around the yard with the dogs and beat them with rubber clubs ... That’s what makes them happy — new sensations! (Alexievich, 2017: 331–2, 337)

This dissolution of political values and ideals of human solidarity reached its most paradoxically tragic moment when national prejudices and ethnic conflicts erupted due to the faltering of the centripetal force of the Soviet system of imperial and transnational administration that had hitherto bound the system together. Gavkar Djuraeva, director of the Moscow’s Tajikistan Fund, Centre for Migration and Law, reports:

1992 ... Instead of the freedom we had all been waiting for, civil war broke out. People from Kulob started killing people from Pamir, and Pamirites started killing Kulobites ... People from Hisor and Garm all splintered off. There were posters all over the city: “Hands off Tajikistan, Russians!” “Go back to Moscow, Communists!” (Alexievich, 2017: 430)

Running through this narrative there is also a thematic thread related to the cultural and pedagogical value of literature as a space for intellectual and aesthetic knowledge of the world as it is and as it might be (re-)imagined, and as a vehicle for moral resistance and for demonstrating the indomitable freedom of the human spirit in all its political and ideological manifestations. This thematic thread, which highlights the multivariate human capacities to understand and communicate the literary phenomenon, can be found right from the beginning of the novel, in the prologue to Part I. The subtitle of a story, “On Ivanushka the Fool and the Magic Goldfish”, that alludes to iconic characters of Russian folktales is intended symbolically to capture the Russian propensity for dreaming.

This recurring theme occurs in the most diverse of narrative contexts, for example, by recourse to the popular stanza with the value of a patriotic incitement — “From the taiga to the British sea, / There’s nothing more mighty than the Red Army”. It appears as an illustration of lyrical, melancholic, or nostalgic situations — “The fire burns bright in the little stove, / Sap drips down the logs, like tears” — and in an evocation of its subversive quality — “People used to be put in jail for *The Gulag Archipelago*, they read it in secret, typed copies of it up on their typewriters, wrote it out by hand. I believed ... I believed [says Anna M, architect, aged 59] that if thousands of people read it, everything would change”. It shows a recognition that it may in some small way make people wiser — Aleksandr Laskovich, a soldier and entrepreneur, who spent his twenties as an emigrant, says “I’d believed Chekhov ... He’s the one who said that you have to squeeze the slave out of yourself drop by drop, that everything about a man ought to be wonderful: his sweet little soul, his cute little clothes, his charming notions. But in lots of cases, it’s just the opposite!”. There is even an allusion to someone’s singular character trait — “And now it’s time to tell you about Yuri [says the film director Irina Vassileva]. In the village, they call him the ‘reading cowherd’, because he herds cows and reads. He has a lot of books by Russian philosophers” (Alexievich, 2017: 98, 110, 292, 405, 478).

This thematic thread makes its final appearance on the last page of the concluding narrative “On Courage and What Comes after”, when the informant, the young student Tania Kulechova, refers to the torture being inflicted at that time by the Belarusian dictatorship: “In school, they told us, ‘Read Bunin and Tolstoy, those books save people’. Why isn’t this the knowledge that’s passed down, instead of the doorknob in the rectum and the plastic bag over the head?” (Alexievich, 2017: 506).

Despite the pessimistic tone of the final question of this diptych of densely-packed discrete yet interconnectable themes, *Secondhand Time* is a documentary epic constructed from oral sources — including interviews with people on the street and kitchen conversations — which ultimately transcends an apparent fatalism that seems to recognize the triumph of the forces of barbarism over the subtle energy of the human spirit and the aesthetic creativity manifested through literature. Alexievich’s work is proof that, even if books like hers do not save their readers in some spiritual manner, at least they allow them to be saved from being unaware of themselves; of the dire effects of their illusions, of their tedium, of their petty powers; thereby preventing them from becoming complicit in pulling all manner of plastic bags over anyone’s head, least of all their own.



## Note

1. The 2013 German translation added the subtitle “Life on the rubble of socialism” to the original title *Secondhand Time*. The 2014 Belorussian edition added “The end of the red man”. The Hungarian publishers opted to replace the title altogether with “Our past is swept away” (2015). The US publisher Random House added “The last of the soviets”, thereby introducing ambiguity over whether the subtitle referred to the organization (the soviet) or was an adjective describing the human protagonist. In Spain (2016), the book was called “The end of homo sovieticus”, using a term Alexievich borrowed from the dissident sociologist Alexander Zinoviev. In the same year, the French publishers came up with *Le fin de l'homme rouge: ou le temps de désenchantement*. Both the European Portuguese (2015) and Brazilian (2016) editions replaced the title altogether with *O Fim do Homem Soviético* [The end of soviet man], an unfortunate choice for a novel by a woman, in which (unsurprisingly) female witnesses are well represented. The later Italian edition reverts to the original title but adds a subtitle that explains, somewhat over-didactically, that we will be reading about Life in Russia after the collapse of communism.

## Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank Chris Gerry for his contribution to the English editing of this essay.

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