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Holocaust testimony or 'Soviet Epic': Svetlana Alexievich's polyphonic texts

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the wartime fate of the Jews in Belarus as it is represented in Svetlana Alexievich's 'documentary fiction'. It asks whether the Jewish experience, as reported by survivors, rescuers and bystanders, is presented as part of a broad Soviet history, or, as western readers might expect, as a central part of the Holocaust. The article considers whether this question can be addressed in literary terms by analysing Alexievich's use of a wide range of social utterances in the composition of her works, to determine whether such polyphony gives expression to Jewish voices or erases their distinctiveness

Svetlana Alexievich's works address extreme episodes in Soviet history, including the invasion of Afghanistan in *Boys in Zinc* (1991) and the eponymous 1986 nuclear disaster in *Chernobyl Prayer* (1997). The present essay considers those of Alexievich's writings which concern the Second World War: *The Unwomanly Face of War* (1985), *Last Witnesses* (1985) and *Second-Hand Time* (2013), in relation to their representation of the fate of the Jews. In each case, Alexievich employs the same method of exploring a historical theme by interviewing eyewitnesses, then collating, editing and ordering the resulting utterances into a montage that constitutes her genre-defying artworks. While *The Unwomanly Face of War* and *Last Witnesses* center respectively on the recall of the Second World War by female combatants and child witnesses, *Second-Hand Time*, ostensibly about the fall of communism in the early 1990s, equally shows the enduring importance of the Russian experience of the German invasion. The significance of this recall is clear in relation to the constituent utterances of these texts, which are 'histories of emotions' about terrible wartime suffering and post-war totalitarianism, yet also the triumph of the 'Great Victory' over Germany.[1]

In *The Unwomanly Face,* the voices of some of the 'million women [who] fought in the Soviet army' were retrieved over 40 years later. As the 'unwomanliness' of the title suggests, these female voices are an alternative to what the narrator calls the masculine 'canon' of military memory, conveying memories not only of the war itself from a woman's viewpoint, but also the personal details in each case of that era of 'her youth'.[2] In *Last Witnesses*, there is an even greater gulf between official and individual

memory. The voices assembled here belong to those who grew up during the war years, a perspective that, as the subtitle *Unchildlike Stories* suggests, is both unexpected and defamiliarizing. The recall of individuals looking back at the war, like that in *The Unwomanly Face*, possesses a strong sense of personal detail in relation to events which those who were children at the time could barely understand, yet which were formative to later life. Finally, *Second-Hand Time* addresses the consequences of the fall of the Soviet Union from varied individual perspectives, as a way of 'piecing together' what the narrator calls 'the history of "domestic", "interior" socialism' in the light of its collapse.[3] The prominence of 'the Great Patriotic War', as the Second World War is called, in these utterances testifies to the importance of the victory for the Soviet self-image, as well as the felt closeness of the wartime era to that of the dissolution of the USSR in 1991.

It is by reason of her methodology with its focus on ordinary people's lives that Alexievich has been described as 'the first major postcolonial author of post-Communism', using her own 'subaltern perspective' as a writer of Ukrainian and Belarusian heritage to represent other similarly subaltern viewpoints on the Soviet empire in its own language.[4] One of those subjugated viewpoints that might stand out on its own account and in its relationship to the whole is that of the Jews in twentieth-century Soviet and post-communist Russia. This article therefore asks what the role of the Holocaust is in the three texts' depiction of the war, and how the form of Alexievich's work constructs a sense of the Jewish experience in its consideration of a national history.

Although the geographical origins of Alexievich's interviewees, particularly in *The Unwomanly Face of War* and *Second-Hand Time*, are from 'all over the country', including Azerbaijan, Crimea and Siberia, those utterances that address the Jewish fate concern events in Belarus.[5] The republic is described in *Chernobyl Prayer* as a '*terra incognita*' to 'the outside world', despite the extent of wartime losses that amounted to the killing of 'one in four Belarusians', while the 'unprecedented carnage' directed against the million-strong and longstanding Jewish population resulted in the loss of 80% of the community.[6] Belarus reappeared in the 'western optic' in 2020 in relation to popular protests against the so-called last dictator of Europe, Alexander Lukashenko, and Alexievich's renown as a member of the opposition, as well as by reason of Lukashenko's supporting the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine under Vladimir Putin.[7] As Alexander Friedman argues, the protest movement was itself met with a pro-government discourse of 'neo-Soviet' antisemitism that ascribes dissent to external Jewish influence, yet also harks back in self-congratulatory fashion to Belarus' war effort, as he puts it: 'On the one hand, there are accusations against the Zionists, and on the other, the role of the USSR in the fight against Nazism and the salvation of Jews is emphasized'.[8] The use of such rhetoric in attempts to discredit the opposition reveals the likeliness of the history of the Second World War and the fate of the Jews to be instrumentalized even in the present.

The voices that make up Alexievich's texts are real-life examples taken from interviews conducted by her, edited together from tapes and notes to give a sense of the domestic and personal experience of great historical change. In the works considered here, Alexievich's method is one of placing side-by-side a wide range of utterances, in the form of extended monologues, some by nameless speakers, others identified by details including the individual's name, age and profession. In *Second-Hand Time*, with its focus on the consequences of the fall of communism, these are set alongside long sections consisting

of a 'discordant chorus' of anonymous snatches of conversation.[9] The effect of weaving together the edited transcripts of many voices is, despite its journalistic roots, highly literary, meaning that, among other such labels as 'documentary literature', or, to use her own term, a 'novel of voices', Alexievich's works are most aptly described as examples of documentary polyphony.[10] Each text is 'a whole formed by the interaction of several consciousnesses', in Mikhail Bakhtin's phrasing about Dostoevsky's works.[11] Alexievich's writing has been seen as a contemporary non-fiction version of this 'democratic' novelistic form, with its constituent voices freed from an omniscient narrator and seemingly enabled to speak for themselves.

The specificity of the Russian Jewish fate has been more fully acknowledged in the post-Soviet era, but the particular circumstances of Belarus since its independence mean that political or cultural narratives about the murder of its Jewish citizens remain 'conspicuously absent'.[12] Alexievich has been described as 'one of very few Belarusians willing to publicly discuss the Holocaust and anti-Semitism',[13] since she acknowledges not only the nature of the murders but also the behavior of local people in relation to their Jewish fellow-citizens. The very presence of such material in her works contrasts with what is otherwise a Belarusian reticence, evident in phenomena ranging from the differential placing of memorials to the absence of a testimonial canon.[14] However, the detail of the Jewish fate remains minimally represented in Alexievich's writing, so that even the almost 700-page long *Second-Hand Time* includes just one survivor's and one bystander's voice, and such allusions are presented in all three works as part of wartime atrocity rather than as a particular genocide. To a western eye, Alexievich's writing thus risks repeating the official memorial policy of not acknowledging the automatic death-sentence under which the Jews existed in the occupied USSR, adding to the sense that, in the former Soviet Union, Holocaust commemoration is 'not the principal pillar of memory' that it has become in the west.[15]

Alexievich's winning the 2015 Nobel Prize for Literature has spurred on the publication of her works in English 'in somewhat random order', perhaps obscuring the fact that two of these texts, all of which have been best-sellers in Russian, first appeared over 30 years ago at the end of the Soviet period.[16] Thus many of the constituent voices of former female combatants in *The Unwomanly Face* recall events in relation to the era's celebration of Stalin's leadership of the wartime victory. By contrast, *Second-Hand Time* was published in the context of the Soviet aftermath, and its voices 'of the day' include those convinced either of betrayal by, or nostalgia for, Soviet certainties.[17] The present article considers the role of the western reader, at whom the English translations of Alexievich's works are aimed, and whether such a reader's encounter with her Soviet- and Belarusian-focused texts reveals a change from, or one that reinforces, preconceptions about memorialization in the former USSR.[18] The 'memory work' of this kind is usually judged to take a universalizing form in its emphasis on heroic sacrifice and military victory, while overlooking the Holocaust experience in failing to distinguish between the Nazis' victims.[19]

Following Alexievich's claim that the 'Jews are part of the story in my books',[20] I will explore whether their persecution and murder is conveyed in its Belarusian context to inclusive effect, or if a different reality, that of the Holocaust, is addressed, even though this is not a term used by any of the author's interlocutors.[21] The questions to be posed here about Alexievich's works therefore involve reflection on the nature of

the genocide of the Jews on Soviet territory, including the fact that the transformation of the Nazis' policy from expulsion to one of 'mass annihilation […] expressed itself to the fullest extent' in Belarus, as well as the suitability of polyphony to represent it.[22]

The specific context of wartime Belarus in Alexievich's works emerges clearly, in the utterances by Jewish survivors and by such 'implicated subjects', in Michael Rothberg's phrase (2019), as neighbors, bystanders and rescuers, in terms of a factual record conveyed through a multi-voiced narrative. This is particularly the case in relation to the proximity and visibility of the Jews' fate to their non-Jewish fellow-Belarusians. The killings took the form of mass shootings and gassings in the open countryside or in local ghettos and camps, yet the ghettos were not the 'transitional spaces of internment from which inmates were deported to extermination camps', as in Poland and elsewhere in Eastern Europe, but rather 'holding pens' for murder.[23] Nonetheless, on the liquidation of the Minsk Ghetto in October 1943, its inmates were deported to their deaths at the extermination site of Maly Trostenets near the Belarusian capital or at Sobibór. The wartime experience in Belarus, as a 'country of forests', was also characterized by the presence of widespread partisan activity, including Jewish groups such as that of the celebrated Bielski family, a factor that looms large in some of the examples discussed here.[24]

Alexievich has described her interlocutors as 'neighbors in memory', in reference to their shared Soviet and post-Soviet experience, and to herself as their 'accomplice', as an individual who grew up in Belarus in the immediate post-war era, and from among whose relatives 11 people 'and their children' were 'burned alive […] some in their cottage, some in a village church', wartime events that, as she adds, 'happened in every family'.[25] However, although non-Jewish Belarusians were also subject to horrifying atrocity, the notion of 'neighbourliness' is a fraught one in Holocaust memory, in relation to the absence of solidarity even in circumstances of common suffering. In Belarus, in the terms Barbara Engelking uses of Poland, the Nazi occupation was a 'triadic' experience for the Jews, since the nature of their plight in relation to the Germans was dependent on the local non-Jewish population.[26] Alexievich's literary practice could itself be considered as a form of verbal neighborliness, since the utterances exist alongside each other while voicing distinctive perspectives on a shared reality. As emerges from the voices we encounter, the relative 'weakness' of 'ethnonationalist sentiments' and antisemitism in pre-war Belarus did not prevent the adoption of Nazi vocabulary and attitudes, nor preclude local collaboration.[27] This is despite what Barbara Epstein calls the wartime 'alliance' that existed between Jews and non-Jews, enabling the former to take an active part in local resistance.[28] The four sections that follow each addresses a different aspect of Jewish existence in Belarus during the war, as these emerge from Alexievich's texts: that of living in hiding or in a ghetto, membership of partisan groups and the national memory of the conflict. Throughout, I will ask whether the specific fate of the Jews is acknowledged alongside that of their fellows, or if it becomes undifferentiated to the point of inaudibility when represented as part of a polyphonic whole.

Hiding

While the Jews were the 'prime target' of the invading Germans, they were not the only victims of wartime mass murder in Belarus.[29] Yet the 'war violence' of German atrocities

against civilians in the Soviet Union, typified by the burning of thousands of Belarusian villages and the murder or expulsion of their inhabitants, has been accorded what Nathalie Moine calls only a 'low importance' in the west.[30] In Alexievich's *Last Witnesses*, the voices of those who were children or young teenagers in 1941 testify in an intimate way to the burning of the villages and the killings that accompanied such acts. Thus Valya Nikitenko, aged four in 1941, has a confused and present-time perception that, 'Our house is burning. Someone carries me out of it, sleepy … my coat and shoe get all burned up', while Tonia Rudakova, who was five, speaks as if including herself among the dead: 'our village was burned down … First they shot us, then they burned us … I came back from the other world'.[31]

Among the child's-eye accounts in *Last Witnesses*, which concern the experience of separation from family members, evacuation, German violence and partisan activity, are two that directly address the fate of the Jews and its genocidal reality, along with other passing allusions. Some non-Jewish child witnesses recall the danger attached to such an identification, as Zima Shimanskaya says, 'The Germans used to burst into apartments all the time, looking for someone – now for Jews, now for partisans', so that Shimanskaya's mother urged her to "hide your Pioneer neckerchief".[32] Mikhail Shinkarev describes his mother leaving eggs outside their cottage so that the Germans would not enter, in case they should 'ask, "*Jude*?"', a particular danger because, as he puts it, 'My sister and I had curly black hair'.[33] It is implied that the designation of either 'partisan' or 'Jew' could entail one's death, although at the same time these two reminiscences suggest a distinction between action, such as the political adherence conveyed by the Pioneer scarf, and the inescapable existential category of one's hair, even in this context where those concerned were not Jewish.

It might make the reader uncomfortable to distinguish between the merciless barbarity with which individuals of all kinds were confronted in wartime Belarus, as that emerges in the children's accounts, even if such events could be seen to conform to the different definitions of crimes against humanity and genocide. Philippe Sands expresses disquiet at the fact that the former's referring to the mass killing of individuals, and the latter to the mass killing of those targeted as a group, seems to make genocide the 'crime of crimes', while risking the formalization of the very divisions between those groups that international law aims to forestall.[34] Indeed, in Alexievich's work readers encounter two examples of the remarkable survival of a mass shooting on the part of a Jewish and a non-Jewish child, apparently similar experiences that would be classified differently, as a genocidal crime and one against humanity respectively.[35]

Nonetheless, Moine claims that, even in the terrible circumstances that faced the non-Jewish Belarusian villagers, 'the killing of every inhabitant … was not always the rule'.[36] Such a factor is implicit in accounts of the sheltering of Jews by their non-Jewish neighbors, although the latter's own lives were put in danger by means of that act. Thus, the story related in *Last Witnesses* by Genia Zavoiner, who was seven at the time of the German invasion in 1941, testifies to the fact that she was saved by a local family whose 'superhumanly human hearts' she wishes to honor.[37] The foundational differential between a Jewish girl and her non-Jewish rescuers is built into Zavoiner's story both factually and conceptually. We learn about her rescuer's compassion as Zavoiner recalls the moment of first encountering the woman whose family was to shelter her, the ghetto's

barbed-wire barrier signifying the extreme closeness yet also the great distinction between their positions:

> A beautiful woman […] stopped next to us on the other side [of the barbed wire] and said to mama, 'I'm so sorry for you'. Mama replied, 'If you're sorry, take my daughter to live with you'.[38]

This story is told by means of a fusion of Zavoiner's child's perspective, evident as she recalls that she wore her 'best fancy clothes', 'a blue top and a sweater with white pom-poms', on leaving the ghetto, and her adult wish in the present that 'everybody [should] know the name of the woman who saved me: Olympia Pozharitskaya, from the village of Genevichi, in the Volozhinsk district'.[39] It also relies on a distinction between two kinds of experience, that of someone who was by definition under a sentence of death, and that of a family under a mortal threat for their actions, since, as Zavoiner puts it: 'They could have been shot at any moment […] I was their death'.[40] Her recall of the war's end adds to the striking nature of this story, as one not only of selfless rescue but of a wider solidarity from the local villagers: 'Other people came running, they also embraced me. And they all admitted that they knew who had been hidden at the farmstead'.[41] A further vignette concludes this history of survival as Zavoiner is reunited with her mother, who paid tribute to the rescuers' 'great hearts': 'Then mama came to get me. She came into the yard and knelt down before that woman and her children'.[42] It is undeniable that Zavoiner's is a story about shared conditions in wartime Belarus, yet, as her mother's kneeling posture suggests, also one of demarcations between Soviet citizens.

In *Second-Hand Time*, Jewish life in the post-Soviet era takes the form of the discourses of either emigration or antisemitic slurs. Many of the text's constituent voices allude to being urged to join acquaintances who have moved to Israel, while, by contrast, hostile utterances blame 'the kikes' for the ills of Russian life, ranging from the theories of 'the Jew' Marx to those of 'liberalism', the death of Christ to that of the Tsar.[43] However, the specificity of the Jewish wartime fate is represented only twice, while such military events as the siege of Leningrad and the costly Soviet victory at Stalingrad are frequently evoked as vivid family and cultural memories. The Holocaust-related episodes, as in *Last Witnesses*, are told from the respective viewpoints of one sympathetic bystander and one Jewish testifier, and, as is the case for Zavoiner's testimony, the distinction between the two categories is blurred by a shared threat of death. Yet it is clear that Engelking's notion of the Jews' 'triadic' jeopardy, in the form of their vulnerability to local people's behavior in addition to that of the Germans, is a crucial factor.

In telling the story of the suicide of her elderly neighbor Alexander Porfirievich Sharpilo in the early 1990s, Marina Tikhonovna Isaichik returns to memories of the war, including the fate of two 'adorable' Jewish boys, 'real cherubs', in her native village near Brest in Belarus.[44] The boys, who had hidden from a mass shooting, were sheltered by Isaichik's neighbor and lived in her barn until they were betrayed by an unknown informant, then hunted down and killed by the Germans, leaving 'Nothing to bury, no one even knew their last names'.[45] The rescuing neighbor was also murdered with such a horrifying contrast to her altruism that Isaichik's weeping, which is evident throughout the interview and redoubles during her account of the murder of all the village's Jews, 'Avram, Yankel, Morduch', becomes uncontrollable, as a narratorial aside conveys: '[*She no longer wipes her tears*]'.[46] The nature of Isaichik's neighbor's death is

hard for the reader to differentiate from that of the Jewish children. This is the case even though the pretexts for the murders were not the same, respectively punitive and genocidal, the woman's arising from her own action, the boys' from their very being. However, Isaichik's long utterance appears in *Second-Hand Time* as a reflection on the reason for her present-day neighbor's suicide. These wartime atrocities are shown as one contextual element that demonstrates the significance of the Great Patriotic War and Sharpilo's despondency at what he considered its betrayal in 1991. The cost of the war is shown to include, rather than to be defined by, the fate of the Jews and those who attempted to assist their genocidally targeted neighbors.

Ghettos

The ghettos in Soviet territories had a specific identity, in relation to their 'open' or makeshift nature, often situated close to the inmates' homes.[47] The effect of this kind of ghetto in 'isolating Jews from existing connections with non-Jews' is evident in the form of the narrative from *Last Witnesses* by Eduard Voroshilov, a non-Jewish boy aged 11 at the time of the invasion. Voroshilov's account of his nomadic existence in Minsk after losing touch with his parents, before he eventually reached a partisan unit, centers on a series of encounters. These include a friendship with Kim, a young boy with whom he 'got acquainted in the street'.[48] The two boys lived together in an abandoned apartment, while the particular danger to Kim is only narrated after the boys' closeness has been described:

> Just then we encountered people in the streets who had yellow stars sewn on their jackets and coats. We had heard about the ghetto … the word was always uttered in a whisper … Kim was a Jewish boy, but he shaved his head, and we decided to pass him off as a Tatar.[49]

The impression of a particular moment – 'Just then' – and the use of the first-person plural of 'we decided', reveals an effort at evasion improvised jointly by the two children, hinting at the possibility of a 'shared' narrative about the wartime ordeal.[50] Yet the way in which Kim's Jewishness is understood by the boys to be a liability leads to their separation, as Voroshilov describes when his friend is 'pushed' by an angry German and his hair revealed: 'Kim's hat fell off. Then they shouted "*Jude!*" They seized him'.[51] The sequestration of Jewish Soviet citizens by means of ghettoization divides the boys and their fates, as Voroshilov describes in his efforts to bring Kim food and to 'save' him from the ghetto:

> After the next pogrom, I came to the appointed place and they made signs to me, 'Kim isn't there!'[52]

As Voroshilov's use of 'they' here implies, the solidarity earlier conveyed by the first-person plural has necessarily vanished, just as his last encounters with Kim took place 'through the wire'.[53]

In *The Unwomanly Face of War*, Liubov Eduardovna Kresova relates an incident from a perspective set contrastingly inside the ghetto. This testimony appears in the section, '"They Needed Soldiers … But We Also Wanted to Be Beautiful"', titled thus to convey what the narrator, in a prefatory section, calls the persistence of the '*invisible signs*' of '*a woman's life in the war*'.[54] The present utterance, framed as an instance of efforts

on the part of women to retain aspects of their pre-war existence, consists of Kresova's perception of an incident that she describes as 'beautiful' yet deathly.[55] Her narrative contrasts the bleak setting of 'the ghetto behind barbed wire', as she puts it, with a romantic scene viewed from a window:

> Across the street from our house a boy and girl were sitting on a bench kissing. There were pogroms around, shootings. And they were kissing! I was astounded by this peaceful picture.[56]

In keeping with the focus of this section of *The Unwomanly Face*, in which there appear reminiscences about such topics as menstruation, childbirth and sexuality as experienced in the realm of war, this instance seems to show the '*unexpected*' presence of what Alexievich, in her narratorial guise, calls the '*joining together*' of the '*everyday life*' of the war and the '*essential life*' of individuals.[57]

However, Kresova gives the incident a different significance in its ghetto setting, where the young people's behavior necessarily entailed their death. Her description of the appearance of a 'German patrol' is followed by one in which the abrupt nature of the shooting of the couple is immediately clear: 'I only saw that the boy and the girl stood up – and had already fallen. They fell down together'.[58] Kresova's acknowledgement that death was always implicit in the young people's act is conveyed in her description of their having 'already fallen', the instantaneity of death a shocking contrast to their 'peaceful' behavior.

Although Kresova's narrative is titled as that of an 'underground fighter', none of her activity of that kind is related. Rather, it is the young couple whose behavior is interpreted by her in the terms of such resistance, as she puts it through a direct address to the interviewer and, by extension, to the reader:

> You must understand: they didn't kiss at home, but outside. Why? They wanted to die like that … They knew they would die in the ghetto anyway, and they wanted to die differently.[59]

This insight, that choosing the nature of one's death amounts to resistance against its inevitability, is presented as having, in Kresova's words, 'just occurred to me'.[60] Such phrasing suggests that the perception takes place in the moment of Kresova's speaking to Alexievich. Although the scene left Kresova, as the couple's witness, 'horrified', her conclusion is that the young people's wish to 'die beautifully. That was their choice, I'm sure', showed that 'They were fighting'.[61] The 'beauty' of these deaths resides in their defiance. Such phrasing challenges the contrastingly prejudicial invocation of a 'beautiful death', as quoted by Daniel Romanovsky from interviews in which non-Jewish Belarusians drew on stereotypes of the Jews as 'intellectual[s]' or fatalists who chose not to defend themselves.[62]

The ghetto environment of Kresova's story testifies to the circumstances of enforced isolation and powerlessness in a genocidal situation. Yet its place within *The Unwomanly Face of War* makes this subsidiary to other concerns. In this sense it resembles Voroshilov's account of Kim's fate, which, even if recalled in heartfelt detail, is just one among many atrocities and losses that the youthful Voroshilov experienced during the occupation as a whole, as his concluding description of being reunited with his mother and the generality of what they had to share suggests: ''Many days passed before we could tell each other about the war'.[63] The ghetto setting reveals that these are scenes from a war-within-a-war.

Partisans

In *Second-Hand Time*, the account called 'A Man's Story' relates the experience of a boy, aged 11 in 1941, who joined the partisans after all the other members of his family had been killed in a mass shooting of Jews outside Minsk. However, the man does not remain wholly anonymous, his name itself having been a wartime liability, as he recounts: 'My last name is Friedman, so I changed it to Lomeiko'.[64] The man's silence about his history up to the moment of relating it to Alexievich is said by him to arise from the post-war suspicion that greeted his experience: 'when I tried to join the Party, they wouldn't accept me: "What kind of communist are you if you if you were in the ghetto … ?" I kept my mouth shut. Never said a word'.[65] Yet this silence, motivated by the negative reception of those who had not fought at the front, seems also to arise from the man's post-traumatic stress, since it is followed by his returning to memories of the war, accompanied by an instance of a direct address to the interviewer about acts of betrayal:

> Peasants would capture [Jews who'd escaped from the ghettos] and give them up to the Germans for a bag of flour, a kilogram of sugar. Write that down … I've held my silence for long enough.[66]

The man's deeply ambivalent recall of the war even in the face of his survival features a present-day unease about his own actions as a partisan, which included reprisals not just against collaborators but their families too. It also marks a contrast to the examples of solidarity and compassion narrated by Zavoiner and Isaichik. While their accounts give some support to the notion of the unusually close 'alliance' between Jews and non-Jews in Belarus as posited by Barbara Epstein, the nameless testifier in this case sees rather an irreparable division. This is despite the fact that his was a 'mixed family' of the kind that Epstein takes to exemplify these close connections.[67] His father's Jewishness became the man's primary self-conception, as well as that of those around him, as he describes the adoption by 'neighbors' of antisemitic designations at the moment war broke out: 'That was when I first heard the word "kike" […] I was a Soviet boy […] I couldn't fathom what they were talking about'.[68] On the other hand, his non-Jewish 'Russian' mother refused to abandon her family, and was shot along with them into the mass grave from which the narrating son miraculously escaped. The testifier's concluding observation, about his homelessness after 'we liberated Minsk', frames a Belarusian experience counter to that outlined by Epstein: 'Strangers had moved into our apartment […] They didn't want to give anything back […] They'd gotten used to the idea that us Jews were gone for good … '.[69]

If the intertwined nature of the Jewish and non-Jewish Belarusian experience makes polyphony its most apt literary expression, this Jewish partisan's thread of its constituent voices presents these close relations as the basis for treachery and murder. Indeed, his account is an element in the section of *Second-Hand Time* devoted to the suicide of another war veteran, Timeryan Zinatov. Since it emerges, through a chorus of voices among which this Jewish man's is heard, that Zinatov was unable to reconcile the fall of communism with his devotion to the Soviet state as one he had risked his life defending, the effect of the man's story is once more an exemplification of the cost of war, rather than the Jewish experience itself.

The story by this man has elements in common, in its representation of the breakdown of neighborliness and recourse to the partisans as the only way of avoiding death, with that of Anna Iosifovna Strumilina from *The Unwomanly Face of War*. Strumilina describes how, after her home town was 'taken by the Germans',

> I discovered that I was Jewish. And before the war we all lived together: Russians, Tatars, Germans, Jews … We were the same.[70]

Such a statement of amicable pre-war coexistence is backed up by Strumilina's assertion that she had never, as she puts it, 'even heard this word "yids", because I lived with mama and papa and books'.[71] As Anika Walke points out, 'Jews residing in [Belarus] did not necessarily perceive themselves as members of a specific and identifiable community', yet, as is evident in polyphonic terms, after the invasion both they and their fellow-Belarusians quickly learnt to do so.[72] Although she does not specify who used the pejorative term, Strumilina's description is followed by her observation that, 'We became like lepers … Some of our acquaintances even stopped saying hello to us'.[73] This suggests that it was 'the neighbors', with whom, as she says, 'before the war, we used to be friends', who started to adopt German modes of discriminatory address, revealing the 'drastic' changes to individual relationships that followed the invasion.[74] Although Strumilina's story is titled as that of a 'partisan', for the most part her account focuses on the prelude to joining up:

> I used to be a pretty girl, I was pampered when I was little … The war came … I didn't want to die … Shooting was scary, I never thought I'd shoot. Oh, lord![75]

Thus, Strumilina's account fits with the ethos of the thematic section of *The Unwomanly Face of War* about transitions into adulthood in which it appears, entitled '"Grow Up Girls … You're Still Green"'. Yet her route to military action with the partisans, who taught her 'everything […] I learned to shoot, with a rifle, a pistol, and a machine gun', is at odds with the experience of the majority of others in the collection, who were determined to join the partisans' ranks despite their gender, youth or parental prohibitions.[76] Strumilina had by contrast imagined 'that I'd sit out the war at home with my mama. My beautiful mama'.[77] But both her parents were killed as a result of Nazi anti-Jewish actions, her mother for infringing antisemitic laws, her father in the ghetto for the sake of a valuable violin. Strumilina's transfer to the partisans arose directly from efforts to escape such a situation, since her father's friend Uncle Volodia reacted to her story by hiding her in his cart for a journey. Her exclamation 'oh lord!', uttered in the moment of narrating, acts to reincarnate the consternation she felt at the time:

> There were piglets squealing, chickens clucking in the cart. We drove for a long time. Oh lord! Till evening. I slept, woke up … That's how I wound up with the partisans …[78]

Strumilina's joining the partisans is presented as part of the experience of young Russian women coming to the traditionally masculine role of armed combatant, which it is the aim of *The Unwomanly Face* to address. For Strumilina, as it was for the man known as Lomeiko, partisan warfare is also an element in a specifically Jewish history, shown to be a way of evading the threat of genocidal murder.

War

In *Second-Hand Time*, the war is a constant touchstone in people's responses to the Soviet Union's dissolution in 1991. The gauging of the new circumstances post-1991 in relation to the wartime past reveals a view of the conflict very different from that in western conceptions, yet one that might also prompt self-scrutiny in an Anglophone reader, in light of the war's similarly reified status in the British and North American national imaginaries. Indeed, it is a chastening experience to come across almost no reference to the other Allies or their contribution to the war effort. A Russian émigré living in the USA describes 'nearly falling off my chair' when an American co-worker claimed, '"We won the war, but you Russians did well too. You helped us"', and goes on to account for this limited triumphalism, as if in a mirror image of what a western audience might say about the USSR: 'That's what they teach them in school'.[79] Britain's role merits no mention at all, and the country is named only once in the context of the royal family, when Prince Harry is wryly nominated as a substitute for the Tsar.[80]

Although *Second Hand Time*'s constituent voices are at odds about whether Stalin's terror was justified by the victory, and whether it was a help or hindrance, the memory of the war is one of national suffering redeemed by military heroism. The victimization of the Jews is hard to reconcile with such a perspective. The notion that the 'Holocaust by bullets' on Soviet territory and the so-called industrialised killing in the death-camps located in Poland are not part of the same genocidal history is revealed in a stark manner by those of Alexievich's interlocutors who mention Auschwitz. Even in the Soviet Union, a country that underwent a brutal invasion and the murder of 1.5 million of its Jewish citizens, over half of them in Belarus, it is, rather, in accord with a central element of western Holocaust memory, the camps situated further west that are seen as synonymous with genocide. Thus Auschwitz is named as the site of terrible war crimes in *The Unwomanly Face*, by a testifier who describes her horror learning after the war about 'Auschwitz, Dachau', while it is the Soviet liberation of the camp that is implicit in another's recall: 'Then we saw, they showed us … the crematoriums … Auschwitz … heaps of women's clothing, children's shoes'.[81] The notion of the loss of Jewish lives closer to home, and that of local collaboration with the murderers, goes unuttered here.

In addition, the legacy of post-1945 war-crimes trials in *Second-Hand Time* is enlisted in relation to a wish for justice to be served on Soviet oppressors, so that the idea of a Nuremberg for the secret police is mentioned on several occasions.[82] It is this Soviet-era context, rather than that of the fate of the Jews, in which the betrayal of neighbors by each other is addressed, in relation to individual, often pettily-motivated, denunciations, as well as those who staffed the penal system, as one testifier puts it: 'Our entire tragedy lies in the fact that our victims and executioners are the same people.'[83] Indeed, the very portal through which the reader approaches *Second-Hand Time* consists of a pair of quotations, one from David Rousset's 1947 *The Days of Our Deaths*, about the Nazi camp system: 'The lessons of the camps is brotherhood in abjection'.[84] The use of epigraphs 'Instead of a Preface', as they are called in *Last Witnesses*, constitutes a further 'erasure of the external perspective' in support of a polyphonic form. Yet Rousset's observation in this case exposes the difference between a concentrationary system like that of

the USSR and the fate of the Jews, to which the 'interchangeability between victim and perpetrator' does not apply.[85]

Second-Hand Time includes voices, albeit reported second-hand, from NKVD interrogators as well as gulag survivors. Thus the man identified as Anna M.'s son gives a sustained meditation on the notion of complicity with a relevance beyond its Soviet setting, not least in relation to current debates about legal and moral responsibility for genocide.[86] However, once more the Holocaust is taken to be a crime committed elsewhere, invoked in order to reflect on the national experience of a police state. Anna M.'s son is provoked by hearing an NKVD interrogator's account of his deeds to consider his own status as 'an ordinary man' with the potential to commit extraordinary crimes, to the extent that, he claims, 'I'm afraid of myself'.[87] The mention of 'ordinariness', reminiscent of conceptualizations of Nazi perpetrators, prompts his recall of some photographs seen online depicting an 'SS brigade from Auschwitz, officers and privates. Lots of girls […] at parties […] out strolling'.[88] This collection, presumably the 'Höcker Album' of photographs taken in the summer of 1944 during the period of the murder of the Hungarian Jews, shows Auschwitz staff enjoying their reward of 'myriad social activities' at the SS resort of Solahütte near the camp.[89] The present testifier sees these images as a parallel to the 'photos of our own Chekists [secret police] that you see at museums […] we were taught that these people were saints'.[90] Auschwitz is therefore not viewed in relation to the fate of particular groups of people, but to suggest that its concentrationary nature and the barbaric human tendencies it enlisted has, unlike that of the Chekists and NKVD agents, been acknowledged and repudiated. It is the Jewish deaths on Soviet soil that remain contrastingly 'marginal' in popular memory.[91]

Conclusion

In the instances of their fate quoted here from Alexievich's works, the Jewish identification of the protagonists by themselves or by others is explicit. Other examples conform more closely, and more ambivalently, to Alexievich's aim to produce an 'encyclopedia of the red civilization', a history of 'utopian' yet 'fanatic[al]' ideas which necessarily 'end in bloodshed', without singling out the Jews' wartime ordeal.[92] This is evident in Second-Hand Time in one of Alexievich's encounters 'with the dead', akin to that with Adam Czerniaków in Claude Lanzmann's Shoah (1985), as composite interviews in which people speak on behalf of someone who has taken their own life. While Czerniaków's death registered his despair at Nazi orders for deportation from the Warsaw Ghetto, Alexievich's examples are those of individuals whose suicides were responses to intolerable political change.

Thus the teenager Igor Poglazov committed suicide as a member of the 'lost generation', in the words of a school friend, having suffered the contradictions of a 'communist upbringing and a capitalist life'.[93] Although Igor's mother talks in her distress about friends inviting her to emigrate and join them in Israel, if this testimony concerns a Jewish family, the identification is not made relevant to what is presented as a post-Soviet story. Rather, Igor is the younger counterpart of Timeryan Zinatov, the veteran whose status changed so quickly on the fall of communism from decorated hero to poverty-stricken pensioner that he threw himself under a train near the Brest fortress he had defended during the war. The disappearance of the Soviet ideal of 'friendship

between peoples', in which the detail of ethnic or religious identity was subordinate to a shared national project, as seems to be the case with Poglazov, is itself regretted in *Second-Hand Time* by invoking Jewish history.[94] Thus we learn from Margarita K., an Armenian refugee who fled to Moscow from Baku after undergoing assaults from Azerbaijani neighbors, that an 'old doctor', whom she identifies by as 'a Jew', warns his patients that, 'They're killing Armenians just for being Armenian the way they once killed Jews just for being Jewish'.[95] The latter remark, as the sole explicit acknowledgement in all these texts of the nature of genocide, presents the Jews' wartime fate most tellingly in comparative or multidirectional terms.

In answer to a journalist's question about whether she plans to devote a book to the experience of the Jews in the former Soviet Union and Belarus in particular, Alexievich is quoted saying 'no'.[96] This confirms that her particular response to the pan-European question of 'how to balance commemorating Jewish and non-Jewish victims' is to include the Jews in the history of a nation rather than on their own account, even if the detail of their relationships with their fellow-citizens reveals a striking disparity.[97]

Including the Jews in what Alexievich calls her 'broader' goal, that of 'documenting the entire Soviet epic', could be seen in positive terms to embrace them as fellow Belarusians, and to acknowledge their centrality in Soviet history.[98] Alexievich's works are distinctive in acknowledging, rather than excluding, the 'painful and uncomfortable memories', as Walke puts it, that 'some Belarusians, who were themselves victims of the occupation regime, had become complicit in the victimization of others'.[99] In Belarus and other post-communist nations, Holocaust memory 'competes for supremacy' with such myths as those revealed in Alexievich's works: the victorious 'Great Patriotic War' and the status of Belarus as the blameless 'Partisan Republic', disrupting the notion of the Holocaust as a 'global' symbol of suffering.[100] Alexievich says in defence of her inclusion of the history of the Jews within her Soviet stories rather than on their own account that, 'I tell about Jewish women who went out to fight alongside Jewish men, and in doing so shattered the myth of Jews who did not participate in the fighting'.[101] Yet the representation of Jewish partisans and soldiers does not have the same effect of mythic deconstruction for a western reader, for whom the Jews' alleged 'cowardice' is unlikely to be a concern.[102] Such a clash of perspectives is embodied in the instance of an anonymous testifier in *The Unwomanly Face*, who recounts the belated discovery that her father, branded a 'traitor' in the post-war era, had in fact 'died a hero': 'he had thrown himself with a grenade under a tank at Mogilev'.[103] It is left to the western-oriented translators to observe, in a footnote explaining the location and history of Mogilev, that, 'Its large Jewish population was exterminated'.[104] Mogilev is not the only location among the three texts that is likely to be familiar to Anglophone readers in relation to massacres of Jewish populations rather than military victory. Including the Jewish experience as part of a national history emphasizes the paradox of a polyphonic literary method, in which the impression of voices speaking freely is one that relies on 'a sort of omnipotence', that is, authorial decisions about what to seek out and what to include. Yet polyphony also allows readers to hear the Holocaust-related voices in a way that conflicts productively with what Olga Solovievna calls the texts' 'meta-language of montage', which tends to subsume them in a wider Soviet narrative.[105] Although the narrator's intention to highlight concerns other than that of the Jews' wartime fate is perceptible, it is possible to read against this grain.

Ultimately, it is the paucity of voices testifying to the Jews' experience, rather than the retrieval of a Jewish contribution to the war effort, that might stand out for a western reader. This relative absence from the texts' multivoicedness could be seen to convey the extremity of the numbers of Jews murdered, who had before the war constituted one in every ten Belarusian citizens.[106] On the other hand, it might suggest editorial selection at the time of gathering witnesses' voices, as well as at the moment of deciding what to include. Either way, the enormity of the loss of 800,000 Jewish lives, that is, 80% of the pre-war community, is not so aptly conveyed simply by means of the near silence of those who survived or witnessed it. Alexievich's practice of 'rewriting' her books and releasing new editions, since she sees them as 'living documents', has resulted in the inclusion of more Holocaust-related material.[107] If these extra details are meant to emphasize further the horror of war, their effect for a western reader is likely to be different. Sophie Pinkham argues that a late addition of this kind to *Second-Hand Time*, Isaichik's account of her neighbor's doomed efforts to shelter Jewish children, 'mak[es] it easier for the reader (especially the foreign reader) to connect with' that work.[108] If this is the case, awareness of the Holocaust's textual presence risks revealing a limited rather than an inclusive perspective on the western reader's part, one that cannot acknowledge the significance of other elements in all three texts, such as the trauma of 'coming to terms with the Soviet past' and the great contemporary influence of the war's legacy.[109]

Alexievich's writings raise central questions, for the very reason that they are largely implicit, about the memory of Jews' wartime fate, not only in relation to events in Belarus, but also whether such memory is competitive, shared or multidirectional, alongside the significance of Jewish history in the diaspora and the status of genocide in the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries. These works offer a 'mnemonic decolonisation', to quote the introduction to this special issue, through their success in disrupting both western and Soviet myths. While 'foreign stereotypes of the Soviet experience' are challenged by revealing the savagery of wartime atrocities against civilians in the east and the enduring importance of the war's aftermath, the partial nature of 'local heroic myths' about united and triumphal resistance is also exposed.[110] However, the Holocaust itself, as a sustained genocide that almost succeeded in destroying Jewish life in Belarus, is positioned uneasily and often lost to sight between these two perspectives.

Notes

1. Alexievich, quoted in Gessen, 'The Memory-Keeper'.
2. Alexievich, *The Unwomanly Face of War*, xii, xvii, hereafter *The Unwomanly Face.*
3. Alexievich, *Second-Hand Time*, 24.
4. Oushakine, 'Neighbours in Memory'.
5. Alexievich, *The Unwomanly Face*, 3.
6. Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, 1; Waligórska, 2–3.
7. 'Introduction', Fedor et al, *War and Memory*, 2. See also Brunner, 'Jews in Belarus'.
8. Friedman, 'State propagandists in Belarus'. See also Friedman, 'Belarusian Revolution 2020'. Thanks to Leonid Rein for these references.
9. Alexievich, *Second-Hand Time*, 305.
10. Ackermann, 'Successors to the Great Victory', 217; Alexievich, quoted in Lindbladh, 'The polyphonic performance of testimony', 282.
11. Bakhtin, *Problems*, 18.

12. Rudling, 'The Invisible Genocide', 72. See such grassroots initiatives as the Belarus Holocaust Memorial Project, its aim to 'establish a memorial at each of the approximately 500 massacre sites throughout Belarus', https://www.belarusmemorials.com/; and Zeliser, *Unwelcome Memory*.
13. Laputska, 'Holocaust discourse'.
14. See Walke, 'Split Memory', Rudling, 'Invisible Genocide'; a collection of testimony by child survivors of the Minsk Ghetto, Bronstein and Demby, eds, *We Remember* (2018), was described as a 'missing link' in a 'forgotten' history (Anonymous, 'Charity heralds book').
15. Fedor, 'Introduction', 11.
16. Adams, review.
17. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 262.
18. As will be apparent, these are translations into American English. Alexievich's works have also appeared in 47 other languages.
19. Rudling, 'The Invisible Genocide', 64.
20. Izikovich, 'Nobel Laureate Tells Dark Story'.
21. Rudling, 'The Invisible Genocide', 68.
22. Rein, 'The Radicalization of Anti-Jewish Policies in Nazi-Occupied Belarus', 233.
23. Walke, *Pioneers*, 4; Wendy Lower quoted in Walke, 'Jewish Youth', 542.
24. Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, 2. On the Bielskis, see Tec, *Defiance*, and Zwick's 2008 film of the same name.
25. Alexievich, *Second-Hand Time*, 23, 25; *The Unwomanly Face*, xiv.
26. Engelking, *Holocaust and Memory*, 11.
27. Rudling, 'The Invisible Genocide', 61.
28. Epstein, 'Jewish-Byelorussian Solidarity', 70.
29. Rudling, 'The Invisible Genocide', 61.
30. Moine, 'Defining "War Crimes Against Humanity"', 442.
31. Alexievich, *Last Witnesses*, 128, 193.
32. Ibid., 28.
33. Ibid., 187.
34. Sands, *East West Street*, xxiv. Kotljarchuk distinguishes on legal grounds between genocide as mass murder with intent to 'exterminat[e] the community as such', undergone by Jews and Roma in Belarus, and murder without such an intent, inflicted on 'other sectors of the Belarusian population', 12. See also Beorn, 4, whose difficulties in attempting to distinguish the Holocaust from but also include it within events in wartime Belarus are evident in his claim that, 'the magnitude of this [Jewish] suffering and loss should not be seen to be minimized by its inclusion in the broader Nazi policy', 4.
35. Alexievich, *Second-Hand Time*, 300; *Last Witnesses*, 265.
36. Moine 'Defining "War Crimes Against Humanity"', 452.
37. Alexievich, *Last Witnesses*, 107.
38. Ibid., 106.
39. Ibid., 106. The Pozharistski family are among the 660 'Righteous Among the Nations' from Belarus, their status conferred in 1999, https://www.yadvashem.org/yv/pdf-drupal/belarus.pdf
40. Alexievich, *Last Witnesses*, 107.
41. Ibid. 107.
42. Ibid.
43. Alexievich, *Second-Hand Time*, 63, 490.
44. Ibid. 135–136.
45. Ibid., 136.
46. Ibid.
47. Walke, 'Split Memory', 183.
48. Alexievich, *Last Witnesses*, 146.
49. Ibid., 147.
50. Moine, 'Defining "War Crimes Against Humanity"', 473.

51. Alexievich, *Last Witnesses*, 148.
52. Ibid.
53. Ibid., 147.
54. Alexievich, *The Unwomanly Face*, 185, italics in original.
55. Ibid., 209.
56. Ibid., 208.
57. Ibid., 185–186, italics in original.
58. Ibid., 208.
59. Ibid.
60. Ibid., 209.
61. Ibid.
62. Romanovsky, 'The Holocaust in the Eyes of *Homo Sovieticus*', 364.
63. Ibid., 149.
64. Alexievich, *Second-Hand Time*, 302.
65. Ibid., 296.
66. Ibid. 296–297.
67. Ibid., 297; Epstein, *The Minsk Ghetto*, 199.
68. Alexievich, *Second-Hand Time*, 297.
69. Ibid., 305.
70. Alexievich, *The Unwomanly Face*, 48.
71. Ibid., 48.
72. Walke, *Pioneers*, 4.
73. Alexievich, *The Unwomanly Face*, 48.
74. Walke, 'Split Memory', 182.
75. Alexievich, *The Unwomanly Face*, 47.
76. Ibid., 48.
77. Ibid.
78. Ibid., 49.
79. Alexievich, *Second-Hand Time*, 570.
80. Ibid., 433.
81. Alexievich, *The Unwomanly Face*, 278, 308.
82. Alexievich, *Second-Hand Time*, 169, 187, 212.
83. Ibid., 396.
84. Ibid., ix.
85. Chaouat adds that this 'tendentious motif […] arguably pertains to the de-judaization of the Holocaust', 'Post-Holocaust French Writing', 159.
86. See Douglas, *The Right Wrong Man*.
87. Alexievich, *Second-Hand Time*, 422.
88. Ibid., 423. See also Browning, *Ordinary Men*.
89. USHMM catalogue entry, 'The Album', https://www.ushmm.org/collections/the-museums-collections/collections-highlights/auschwitz-ssalbum/album
90. Alexievich, *Second-Hand Time*, 422–423.
91. Romanovsky, 'The Holocaust in the Eyes of *Homo Sovieticus*', 357.
92. Alexievich quoted in Izikovich, 'Nobel Laureate Tells Dark Story'.
93. Alexievich, *Second-Hand Time*, 251.
94. Ibid., 176.
95. Ibid., 463, 466.
96. Izikovich, 'Nobel Laureate Tells Dark Story'.
97. Walke, 'Split Memory', 195.
98. Izikovich, 'Nobel Laureate Tells Dark Story'.
99. Ibid.
100. Smilovitsky, 'Jewish Studies in Belarus', in Kascian, et al, *Belarusian Review*, 9; Fedor, 'Introduction', 9. However, this is not an effect limited to the former Soviet Union, as for instance

Stefanie Rauch claims in relation to the 'peculiar Britishness' of memorialization in the UK (2021).

101. Izikovich, 'Nobel Laureate Tells Dark Story'.
102. Smalianchuk, 'The Holocaust Tragedy in the Oral History of Belarusians', 84. What might rather be western notions of 'Jewish passivity', relating to alleged failures to resist, by contrast to 'cowardice', the myth of failure to enlist in the Red Army, are themselves challenged in a Belarusian setting by the casting of the Bond actor Daniel Craig as one of the Jewish Bielski brother partisans in Zwick's *Defiance* (see Romanovsky 1999, Rauch 2021).
103. Alexievich, *The Unwomanly Face*, xlii.
104. Ibid. xlii, footnote.
105. Solovievna, 'Memory'.
106. Rossoliński-Liebe, 'Introduction', 136.
107. Pinkham.
108. Pinkham.
109. Solovievna, 'Memory'; Kotljarchuk, 10.
110. Mort, 'Svetlana Alexievich's Chorus of Fire'.

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