When A Woman Remembers:

A Feminist Literary Analysis of *The Unwomanly Face of War*

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Honor Pledge: I will neither give nor receive aid on this assessment.

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When a woman remembers her experiences and is given the opportunity to share them, the world gains an additional viewpoint, a more complete comprehension of history. Svetlana Alexievich's passion is giving women the opportunity and platform to tell their stories, and in doing so, she is expanding the traditional, patriarchal narrative. The reason Alexievich's work is necessary is due to the fact that historical narratives have historically been male-dominated and male-written. Ruth Rosen, a pioneering historian of gender and society and professor at the University of California at Davis, explains this, saying:

> Traditional history has been most concerned with the re-creation of the elite intellectual military, economic and political powers that fashioned the course of events. Most general histories have ignored minority groups and women. Instead, they are records of diplomatic decisions, military maneuvers, and economic exchanges. Biographies of white male authors, soldiers, industrialists, and politicians crowded the library shelves labeled "history." History has been the record of those who controlled other people's lives.[1]

Rosen's point applies particularly well in relation to the coverage of war narratives. When people think generally about war, most imagine men at the frontlines, men in negotiation rooms, and men sacrificing their lives for their nation. It would be rare to come across someone who readily thought of a woman first when asked about the war. In history, war is portrayed as a manly activity. However, this presentation of history is patriarchally skewed. Alexievich's *The Unwomanly Face of War* works to address this misrepresentation within the specific period of WWII Soviet Union. Within the book, Alexievich dies deep into Soviet history to discover

[1] Ruth Rosen, "Sexism in History, or Writing Women's History Is A Tricky Business," in *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (Minneapolis: National Council on Family Relations, 1971), 541–544.

female narrations of WWII that break historical stereotypes and paint women as frontline fighters. The insights gained throughout Alexievich's collection of oral histories showcase why the expansion of history with a feminist focus is necessary as women are able to speak their own truths but also offer insights into historical events that emphasize raw emotions and honest reactions. The emotional and traumatic impact of wars cannot be fully understood without examining women's viewpoints; Svetlana Alexievich's *The Unwomanly Face of War* exemplifies the significance of including women's experiences in war coverage and highlights the need for further exploration of women's perspectives in understanding the effects of war on both individuals and society.

The Unwomanly Face of War presents an oral history of Soviet women during WWII, adding a collection of stories to the collective memory. The book acts as "a reflection of this process of 'revelation,' uneven and incomplete as it was."[2] Alexievich has given these women an opportunity to tell their stories, a place to reveal their truths. Women throughout the book, relive their pasts, explaining the traditional roles of women during wartime, women's contributions to the war effort, and the limitation and discrimination faced by women during the war. By collecting these stories Alexievich "did not so much seek to debunk the great, legitimizing myth of the postwar Soviet regime – the successful war against Nazi Germany – as to suggest that the official version of the war remained an incomplete, 'men's' version and that the true experience of that conflict could better be grasped through the recollections of women combatants."[3] With

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[2] Serhy Yekelchyk, "People's war, state's memory?," in *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, Vol. 61, No. 4 (Montreal: Canadian Association of Slavists, 2019), 439-452.

[3] Heather J. Coleman, "Svetlana Alexievich: the writer and her times," in *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, Vol. 59, No. 3-4 (Montreal: Canadian Association of Slavists, 2017), 193-195.

this reasoning, women's perspectives present an extremely fascinating lens on WWII. This in part is due to the emotional suppression pressed on men within patriarchal societies.

Although typically regarded in relation to its negative impact on women, the patriarchy must also be analyzed in reference to its negative impact on men, that in turn further hurts women. In specific, the difference in emotional response is heavily impacted by gender. In a 1998 study at the University of Amsterdam, researchers found:

> Women are generally more emotionally expressive than men… However, not all emotions are expressed to a greater extent by women. There is some evidence that men express their anger more often and with greater intensity, at least when the more aggressive form of this emotion is considered; by contrast, women cry more when they experience anger. Men have also been found to express pride more than women do.[4]

This repression of emotional expression can in part be attributed to the patriarchy due to the hypermasculine and dominant gender roles pushed on men as "men are more motivated to stay in control and tend to express emotions that reflect their power."[5] In *The Unwomanly Face of War*, this is demonstrated when Alexievich details one of her experiences interviewing a woman with her husband present, saying:

> I visited a family… Both husband and wife had fought… The man immediately set his wife to the kitchen: "Prepare something for us." The kettle was already boiling, and the sandwiches were served, she sat down with us, but the husband immediately got her to

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[4] Monique Timmers, Agneta H. Fischer, and Antony S. R. Manstead, "Gender Differences in Motives for Regulating Emotions," in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Vol. 24, No. 9 (California: Sage Publications, 1998), 974.

[5] Timmers, "Gender Differences in Motives for Regulating Emotions," 974.

> her feet again: “Where are the strawberries? Where are our treats from the country?” After my repeated requests, he reluctantly relinquished his place, saying: “Tell it the way I taught you. Without tears and women’s trifles: how you wanted to be beautiful, how you wept when they cut off your braid.” Later she whispered to me: “He studied The History of the Great Patriotic War with me all last night. He was afraid for me. And now he’s worried I won’t remember right. Not the way I should.” … That happened more than once, in more than one house.[6]

Moments like these highlight the gender-based difference in emotional response. The husband aims to protect the narrative of a strong Soviet nation, pushing his wife to do the same. However, once alone and comfortable with Alexievich the wife shares much deeper and more emotion-based stories.

A woman’s ability to infuse her story with emotion, to embrace her body’s natural reaction to an event allows her to more robustly tell a story than her male counterpart. The stories collected within *The Unwomanly Face of War* are both “disturbingly macabre and obscenely ordinary at the same time.”[7] Men's and women’s experiences in the war are clearly different in many ways; however, women’s interpretation and consequent response to events differ greatly from their male counterparts. For example, when discussing seeing death in *The Unwomanly Face of War*, Vera Safronovna Davydova, a Red Army foot soldier, says, “I’m not afraid of dead people, even as a child I wasn’t afraid of cemeteries, but I was twenty-two, I was standing guard

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[6] Svetlana Alexievich, *The Unwomanly Face of War: An Oral History of World War II,* trans. by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Penguin Random House LLC, 2018), xxiv.

[7] Helga Lenart-Cheng, “Personal and Collective Memories in the Works of Svetlana Alexievich,” in History & Memory, Vol. 32, No. 2 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020), 78-109.

for the first time… In those two hours, my hair turned gray… It was my first gray hair, I discovered a whole streak in the morning."[8] Opposingly, Lev Slëzzkin, a Red Army tanker, wrote home to his mother during WWII, saying:

> Sometimes I wonder what I am doing. People jump out from a foxhole in front of my machine and run, run, and I cold-bloodedly take aim as if it were training, cut them down with a machine gun, and when they fall I am happy. Or they set up a long anti-tank gun, a cannon - and you have one thought: faster, faster, and if the black smoke of an explosion takes its place - I am happy.[9]

When comparing Davydova's and Slëzzkin's statements, a difference in emotional expression is seen with Slëzzkin describing his killings with the simple adjective "happy" while Davydova explains her emotions with a hyperbole surrounding the gray-ing of her hair. In a way, Davydova and other women's descriptions of war seem almost more poetic. When women's perspectives are included in the historical discourse and writing, stories previously led solely by fact are now infused with emotions and feelings that lead readers not only to a higher understanding but also to a higher level of empathy.

Alexievich understands the importance of women's inclusion which is why she works to create pieces like *The Unwomanly Face of War*, but other historians and societies do not, both generally and specifically in relation to the Soviet Union. Generally, women face misogyny and sexism every day even when they are trying to speak their own truths. Alexievich touches on the

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[8] Alexievich, *The Unwomanly Face of War*," 64.

[9] Brandon M. Schechter, *The Stuff of Soldiers: A History of the Red Army in World War II through Objects* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019), 155-156.

responses she received when writing a book dictated by female interviews, saying "I had been warned more than once (especially by male writers): 'Women are going to invent a pile of things for you. All sorts of fiction.'"[10] Additionally, the concept of the patriarchy is sustainable if women gain liberation, meaning giving a "voice to the previously silenced" would counteract the aims of a patriarchal society.[11] The Soviet Union's repression of female voices aligns with this due to the need to restructure society post-war due to the power gains women had made throughout the war as members of the Red Army. In the aftermath of WWII, female members of the Red Army found a "lack of social acceptance" and found difficulty finding ways to "fuse their two identities, wartime vs. female."[12] This societal rigidness was not by mistake but instead a targeted approach by the Soviet government to revert gender roles to the way they were before WWII in order to maintain control. In the Soviet Union, this worked leading to a silenced female population and a hidden history of women in the Red Army. Alexievich speaks on this, saying "It was men writing about men- that much was clear at once. Everything we know about war we know with 'a man's voice.' We are all captives of 'men's' notions and 'men's' sense of war. 'Men's' words. Women are silent. No one but me ever questioned my grandmother."[13]

In conclusion, Svetlana Alexievich's *The Unwomanly Face of War* sheds light on the importance of including women's experiences in the narrative of history, especially in relation to

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[10] Alexievich, *The Unwomanly Face of War*," xxiii.

[11] Joan Acker, "The Problem with Patriarchy," in *Sociology*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (California: Sage Publications, 1989), 235.

[12] Liubov Kartashova, "The Deconstruction of Patriarchal War Narratives in Svetlana Alexievich's *The Unwomanly Face of War"* (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 2020), 26-27. ProQuest.

[13] Alexievich, xv.

war. The book presents a collection of oral histories of Soviet women during World War II, giving them the opportunity to tell their stories and providing an additional viewpoint on the war. Through Alexievich's work, it is clear that historical narratives have historically been male-dominated, and women's perspectives have been largely overlooked. Including women's perspectives not only allows for a more complete understanding of historical events but also highlights the emotional and traumatic impact of war on individuals and society. The book also demonstrates how the patriarchy not only negatively affects women but also impacts men, leading to a difference in emotional response. *The Unwomanly Face of War* exemplifies the significance of expanding history with a feminist focus and highlights the need for further exploration of women's perspectives in understanding the effects of war. However, those who lived through history do not live forever, and writing history is timely. As stated by one of Alexievich's interviewees, "Ask us while we're alive. Don't rewrite afterward without us. Ask…"[14]

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[14] Alexievich, xliii.

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