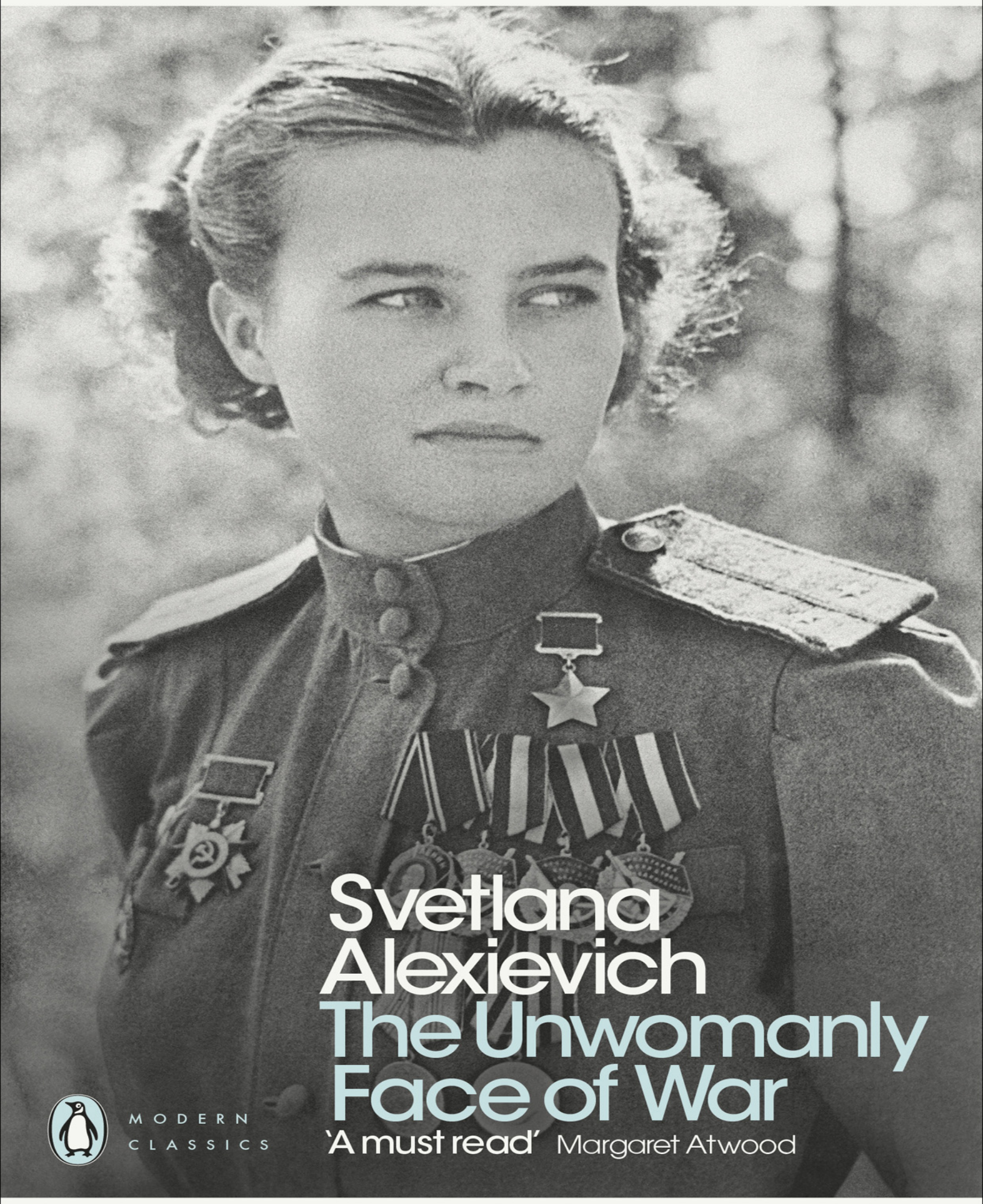

Svetlana Alexievich

The Unwomanly Face of War

'A must read' Margaret Atwood

MODERN CLASSICS

Svetlana Alexievich

THE UNWOMANLY FACE OF WAR

Translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky

Contents

FOLLOW PENGUIN

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Svetlana Alexievich was born in Ivano-Frankivsk in 1948 and has spent most of her life in the Soviet Union and present-day Belarus, with prolonged periods of exile in Western Europe. Starting out as a journalist, she developed her own, distinctive non-fiction genre which brings together a chorus of voices to describe a specific historical moment. Her works include *The Unwomanly Face of War* (1985), *Last Witnesses* (1985), *Boys in Zinc* (1991), *Chernobyl Prayer* (1997) and *Second-Hand Time* (2013). She has won many international awards, including the 2015 Nobel Prize in Literature for 'her polyphonic writings, a monument to suffering and courage in our time'.

Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky have translated works by Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Chekhov, Gogol, Bulgakov and Pasternak. They were twice awarded the PEN/Book-of-the-Month Club Translation Prize (for Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* and Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*). They are married and live in France.

PENGUIN MODERN CLASSICS

THE UNWOMANLY FACE OF WAR

‘Magnificent … Alexievich doesn’t just hear what these women say; she cares about how they speak … It’s a mark of her exceptional mind that she tries to retain the incomprehensible in any human story’ Gaby Wood, *Daily Telegraph*, Books of the Year

‘An astonishing book, harrowing and life-affirming. It deserves the widest possible readership’ Paula Hawkins, author of *The Girl on the Train*

‘Magnificent … After decades of the war being remembered by “men writing about men,” she aims to give voice to an ageing generation of women who found themselves dismissed not just as storytellers but also as veterans, mothers and even potential wives … a literary excavation of memory itself’ Rebecca Reich, *The New York Times Book Review*

‘This is an oral history of women who fought in the Second World War. And it’s brilliant’ Kamila Shamsie, *Guardian*, Books of the Year

‘Nothing can quite prepare the reader for the shattering force of Svetlana Alexievich’s oral history of Soviet women in the Second World War’ Geoff Dyer, *Observer*, Books of the Year

‘As with her other books, terrifying documentation meets great artfulness of construction’ Julian Barnes

‘Alexievich’s “documentary novels” are crafted and edited with a reporter’s cool eye for detail and a poet’s ear for the

intricate rhythms of human speech. Reading them is like eavesdropping on a confessional. This is history at its rawest and most uncomfortably intimate … The book is not merely a corrective to male-centred accounts of conflict; it is a shattering and sometimes overwhelming experience' Andrew Dickson, *Evening Standard*

'Much more than a historical harvest, this is a polyphonic book, superbly orchestrated … a mark of her exceptional mind' Anthony Cummins, *Daily Telegraph*, Books of the Year

'These accounts fight our ingrained ideas about what makes a war story' *Vanity Fair*

'Refusing to pass judgment, crediting all, she listens, suffers and brings to life … It took years and many miles of traveling to find and capture all the testimonies here … We still end up feeling that we have been sitting at her side. With her, we hear the memories of partisans, guerrilla fighters trapped behind the lines' *Wall Street Journal*

'A revelation … Alexievich's text gives us precious details of the kind that breathe life into history … more than a historical document – it is the stuff of history itself' Lyuba Vinogradova, *Financial Times*

'A profoundly humbling, devastating book, it should be compulsory reading for anyone wishing to understand the experience of the war and its haunting legacy in the former Soviet Union' Daniel Beer, *Literary Review*

'We hear the testimony of Soviet women as they rush to the front to in serve a wide range of roles, from nurses to snipers, in the battle against the invading fascists. This book was initially published in Russia in the 1980s, but with a great deal of the explicit detail scrubbed out by anxious authorities. Now with the full text restored and expanded,

the book has appeared in a brilliant English translation by Richard Pevear for the first time' Kathryn Hughes, *Guardian*, Books of the Year

'One of the most heart-breaking books I have ever read … I urge you to read it' Julian Evans, *Daily Telegraph*

'Women did everything – this book reminds and reveals. They learned to pilot planes and drop bombs, to shoot targets from great distances … Alexievich has turned their voices into history's psalm' *Boston Globe*

'Alexievich did an enormous service, recovering these stories … *The Unwomanly Face of War* tells the story of these forgotten women, and its great achievement is that it gives credit to their contribution but also to the hell they endured' Washington Post

'In a post-truth era when journalism is under pressure – susceptible to propaganda, sensationalism, and "alternative facts" – the power of documentary literature stands out more clearly than ever … Listen to Alexievich' *The Atlantic*

'One of the most gifted writers of her generation' *Economist*, Books of the Year

'A remarkable collection of testimonies … Sitting at kitchen tables, Alexievich coaxes out of the women stories that describe a reality vastly different from the officially sanctioned version …. They speak guardedly but vividly of fleeting encounters, deep relationships, unexpressed feelings' *New Yorker*

From a Conversation with a Historian

—At what time in history did women first appear in the army?

—Already in the fourth century B.C. women fought in the Greek armies of Athens and Sparta. Later they took part in the campaigns of Alexander the Great.

The Russian historian Nikolai Karamzin[fn1] wrote about our ancestors: “Slavic women occasionally went to war with their fathers and husbands, not fearing death: thus during the siege of Constantinople in 626 the Greeks found many female bodies among the dead Slavs. A mother, raising her children, prepared them to be warriors.”

—And in modern times?

—For the first time in England, where from 1560 to 1650 they began to staff hospitals with women soldiers.

—What happened in the twentieth century?

—The beginning of the century … In England during World War I women were already being taken into the Royal Air Force. A Royal Auxiliary Corps was also formed and the

Women’s Legion of Motor Transport, which numbered 100,000 persons.

In Russia, Germany, and France many women went to serve in military hospitals and ambulance trains.

During World War II the world was witness to a women’s phenomenon. Women served in all branches of the military in many countries of the world: 225,000 in the British army, 450,000 to 500,000 in the American, 500,000 in the German …

About a million women fought in the Soviet army. They mastered all military specialties, including the most “masculine” ones. A linguistic problem even emerged: no feminine gender had existed till then for the words “tank driver,” “infantryman,” “machine gunner,” because women had never done that work. The feminine forms were born there, in the war …

A Human Being is Greater than War

Millions of the cheaply killed
Have trod the path in darkness …

—OSIP MANDELSTAM [fn1]

FROM THE JOURNAL OF THIS BOOK

1978–1985

I am writing a book about war …

I, who never liked to read military books, although in my childhood and youth this was the favorite reading of everybody. Of all my peers. And that is not surprising—we were the children of Victory. The children of the victors. What is the first thing I remember about the war? My childhood anguish amid the incomprehensible and frightening words. The war was remembered all the time: at school and at home, at weddings and christenings, at celebrations and wakes. Even in children's conversations. The neighbors' boy once asked me: "What do people do under the ground? How do they live there?" We, too, wanted to unravel the mystery of war.

It was then that I began to think about death … And I never stopped thinking about it; it became the main mystery of life for me.

For us everything took its origin from that frightening and mysterious world. In our family my Ukrainian grandfather, my mother’s father, was killed at the front and is buried somewhere in Hungary, and my Belorussian grandmother, my father’s mother, was a partisan[fn2] and died of typhus; two of her sons served in the army and were reported missing in the first months of the war; of three sons only one came back. My father. The Germans burned alive eleven distant relations with their children—some in their cottage, some in a village church. These things happened in every family. With everybody.

For a long time afterward the village boys played “Germans and Russians.” They shouted German words: *Hände hoch! Zurück! Hitler kaputt!*

We didn’t know a world without war; the world of war was the only one familiar to us, and the people of war were the only people we knew. Even now I don’t know any other world and any other people. Did they ever exist?

The village of my postwar childhood was a village of women. Village women. I don’t remember any men’s voices. That is how it has remained for me: stories of the war are told by women. They weep. Their songs are like weeping.

In the school library half of the books were about the war. The same with the village library, and in the nearby town, where my father often drove to get books. Now I know the reason why. Could it have been accidental? We were making war all the time, or preparing for war. Remembering how we made war. We never lived any other way, and probably didn’t know how. We can’t imagine how to live differently, and it will take us a long time to learn, if we ever do.

At school we were taught to love death. We wrote compositions about how we would like to die in the name of … We dreamed …

But the voices outside shouted about other more alluring things.

For a long time I was a bookish person, both frightened and attracted by reality. My fearlessness came from an ignorance of life. Now I think: If I were a more realistic person, could I throw myself into that abyss? What caused it all—ignorance? Or the sense of a path? For the sense of a path does exist …

I searched for a long time … What words can convey what I hear? I searched for a genre that would correspond to how I see the world, how my eye, my ear, are organized.

Once a book fell into my hands: *I Am from a Burning Village,* by A. Adamovich, Ya. Bryl, and V. Kolesnik.[fn3] I had experienced such a shock only once before, when I read Dostoevsky. Here was an unusual form: the novel was composed from the voices of life itself, from what I had heard in childhood, from what can be heard now in the street, at home, in a café, on a bus. There! The circle was closed. I had found what I was looking for. I knew I would.

Ales Adamovich became my teacher …

For two years I was not so much meeting and writing as thinking. Reading. What will my book be about? Yet another book about war? What for? There have been a thousand wars—small and big, known and unknown. And still more has been written about them. But … 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. My mother. Even those who were at the front say nothing. If they suddenly begin to remember, they don’t talk about the “women’s” war but about the “men’s.” They tune in to the canon. And only at

home or waxing tearful among their combat girlfriends do they begin to talk about their war, the war unknown to me. Not only to me, to all of us. More than once during my journalistic travels I witnessed, I was the only hearer of, totally new texts. I was shaken as I had been in childhood. The monstrous grin of the mysterious shows through these stories … When women speak, they have nothing or almost nothing of what we are used to reading and hearing about: How certain people heroically killed other people and won. Or lost. What equipment there was and which generals. Women's stories are different and about different things. "Women's" war has its own colors, its own smells, its own lighting, and its own range of feelings. Its own words. There are no heroes and incredible feats, there are simply people who are busy doing inhumanly human things. And it is not only they (people!) who suffer, but the earth, the birds, the trees. All that lives on earth with us. They suffer without words, which is still more frightening.

But why? I asked myself more than once. Why, having stood up for and held their own place in a once absolutely male world, have women not stood up for their history? Their words and feelings? They did not believe themselves. A whole world is hidden from us. Their war remains unknown …

I want to write the history of that war. A women's history.

After the first encounters …

Astonishment: these women's military professions—medical assistant, sniper, machine gunner, commander of an antiaircraft gun, sapper—and now they are accountants, lab technicians, museum guides, teachers … Discrepancy of the roles—here and there. Their memories are as if not about themselves, but some other girls. Now they are surprised at themselves. Before my eyes history

“humanizes” itself, becomes like ordinary life. Acquires a different lighting.

I’ve happened upon extraordinary storytellers. There are pages in their lives that can rival the best pages of the classics. The person sees herself so clearly from above—from heaven, and from below—from the ground. Before her is the whole path—up and down—from angel to beast. Remembering is not a passionate or dispassionate retelling of a reality that is no more, but a new birth of the past, when time goes in reverse. Above all it is creativity. As they narrate, people create, they “write” their life. Sometimes they also “write up” or “rewrite.” Here you have to be vigilant. On your guard. At the same time pain melts and destroys any falsehood. The temperature is too high! Simple people—nurses, cooks, laundresses—behave more sincerely, I became convinced of that … They, how shall I put it exactly, draw the words out of themselves and not from newspapers and books they have read—not from others. But only from their own sufferings and experiences. The feelings and language of educated people, strange as it may be, are often more subject to the working of time. Its general encrypting. They are infected by secondary knowledge. By myths. Often I have to go for a long time, by various roundabout ways, in order to hear a story of a “woman’s,” not a “man’s” war: not about how we retreated, how we advanced, at which sector of the front … It takes not one meeting, but many sessions. Like a persistent portrait painter.

I sit for a long time, sometimes a whole day, in an unknown house or apartment. We drink tea, try on the recently bought blouses, discuss hairstyles and recipes. Look at photos of the grandchildren together. And then … After a certain time, you never know when or why, suddenly comes this long-awaited moment, when the person departs from the canon—plaster and reinforced concrete, like our monuments—and goes on to herself. Into herself. Begins to

remember not the war but her youth. A piece of her life … I must seize that moment. Not miss it! But often, after a long day, filled with words, facts, tears, only one phrase remains in my memory (but what a phrase!): “I was so young when I left for the front, I even grew during the war.” I keep it in my notebook, although I have dozens of yards of tape in my tape recorder. Four or five cassettes …

What helps me? That we are used to living together. Communally. We are communal people. With us everything is in common—both happiness and tears. We know how to suffer and how to tell about our suffering. Suffering justifies our hard and ungainly life. For us pain is art. I must admit, women boldly set out on this path …

How do they receive me?

They call me “little girl,” “dear daughter,” “dear child.” Probably if I was of their generation they would behave differently with me. Calmly and as equals. Without joy and amazement, which are the gifts of the meeting between youth and age. It is a very important point, that then they were young and now, as they remember, they are old. They remember across their life—across forty years. They open their world to me cautiously, to spare me: “I got married right after the war. I hid behind my husband. Behind the humdrum, behind baby diapers. I wanted to hide. My mother also begged: ‘Be quiet! Be quiet! Don’t tell.’ I fulfilled my duty to the Motherland, but it makes me sad that I was there. That I know about it … And you are very young. I feel sorry for you …” I often see how they sit and listen to themselves. To the sound of their own soul. They check it against the words. After long years a person understands that this was life, but now it’s time to resign yourself and get ready to go. You don’t want to, and it’s too bad to vanish just like that. Casually. In passing. And when

you look back you feel a wish not only to tell about your life, but also to fathom the mystery of life itself. To answer your own question: Why did all this happen to me? You gaze at everything with a parting and slightly sorrowful look … Almost from the other side … No longer any need to deceive anyone or yourself. It’s already clear to you that without the thought of death it is impossible to make out anything in a human being. Its mystery hangs over everything.

War is an all too intimate experience. And as boundless as human life …

Once a woman (a pilot) refused to meet with me. She explained on the phone: “I can’t … I don’t want to remember. I spent three years at war … And for three years I didn’t feel myself a woman. My organism was dead. I had no periods, almost no woman’s desires. And I was beautiful … When my future husband proposed to me … that was already in Berlin, by the Reichstag … He said: ‘The war’s over. We’re still alive. We’re lucky. Let’s get married.’ I wanted to cry. To shout. To hit him! What do you mean, married? Now? In the midst of all this—married? In the midst of black soot and black bricks … Look at me … Look how I am! Begin by making me a woman: give me flowers, court me, say beautiful words. I want it so much! I wait for it! I almost hit him … I was about to … He had one cheek burned, purple, and I see: he understood everything, tears are running down that cheek. On the still-fresh scars … And I myself can’t believe I’m saying to him: ‘Yes, I’ll marry you.’

“Forgive me … I can’t …”

I understood her. But this was also a page or half a page of my future book.

Texts, texts. Texts everywhere. In city apartments and village cottages, in the streets and on the train … I listen … I turn more and more into a big ear, listening all the time to another person. I “read” voices.

A human being is greater than war …

Memory preserves precisely the moments of that greatness. A human being is guided by something stronger than history. I have to gain breadth—to write the truth about life and death in general, not only the truth about war. To ask Dostoevsky's question: How much human being is in a human being, and how to protect this human being in oneself? Evil is unquestionably tempting. Evil is more artful than good. More attractive. As I delve more deeply into the boundless world of war, everything else becomes slightly faded, more ordinary than the ordinary. A grandiose and predatory world. Now I understand the solitude of the human being who comes back from there. As if from another planet or from the other world. This human being has a knowledge that others do not have, that can be obtained only there, close to death. When she tries to put something into words, she has a sense of catastrophe. She is struck dumb. She wants to tell, the others would like to understand, but they are all powerless.

They are always in a different space than the listener. They are surrounded by an invisible world. At least three persons participate in the conversation: the one who is talking now, the one she was then, at the moment of the event, and myself. My goal first of all is to get at the truth of those years. Of those days. Without sham feelings. Just after the war this woman would have told of one war; after decades, of course, it changes somewhat, because she adds her whole life to this memory. Her whole self. How she lived those years, what she read, saw, whom she met. Finally, whether she is happy or unhappy. Do we talk by ourselves, or is someone else there? Family? If it's friends, what sort? Friends from the front are one thing, all the rest are another. My documents are living beings; they change and fluctuate together with us; there is no end of things to be gotten out of them. Something new and necessary for us precisely now. This very moment. What are we looking for? Most often not

great deeds and heroism, but small, human things, the most interesting and intimate for us. Well, what would I like most to know, for instance, from the life of ancient Greece? From the history of Sparta? I would like to read how people talked at home then and what they talked about. How they went to war. What words they spoke on the last day and the last night before parting with their loved ones. How they saw them off to war. How they awaited their return from war … Not heroes or generals, but ordinary young men …

History through the story told by an unnoticed witness and participant. Yes, that interests me, that I would like to make into literature. But the narrators are not only witnesses—least of all are they witnesses; they are actors and makers. It is impossible to go right up to reality. Between us and reality are our feelings. I understand that I am dealing with versions, that each person has her version, and it is from them, from their plurality and their intersections, that the image of the time and the people living in it is born. But I would not like it to be said of my book: her heroes are real, and no more than that. This is just history. Mere history.

I write not about war, but about human beings in war. I write not the history of a war, but the history of feelings. I am a historian of the soul. On the one hand I examine specific human beings, living in a specific time and taking part in specific events, and on the other hand I have to discern the eternally human in them. The tremor of eternity. That which is in human beings at all times.

They say to me: Well, memories are neither history nor literature. They’re simply life, full of rubbish and not tidied up by the hand of an artist. The raw material of talk, every day is filled with it. These bricks lie about everywhere. But bricks don’t make a temple! For me it is all different … It is precisely there, in the warm human voice, in the living reflection of the past, that the primordial joy is concealed and the insurmountable tragedy of life is laid bare. Its chaos

and passion. Its uniqueness and inscrutability. Not yet subjected to any treatment. The originals.

I build temples out of our feelings … Out of our desires, our disappointments. Dreams. Out of that which was, but might slip away.

Once again about the same thing … I'm interested not only in the reality that surrounds us, but in the one that is within us. I'm interested not in the event itself, but in the event of feelings. Let's say—the soul of the event. For me feelings are reality.

And history? It is in the street. In the crowd. I believe that in each of us there is a small piece of history. In one half a page, in another two or three. Together we write the book of time. We each call out our truth. The nightmare of nuances. And it all has to be heard, and one has to dissolve in it all, and become it all. And at the same time not lose oneself. To combine the language of the street and literature. The problem is also that we speak about the past in present-day language. How can we convey the feelings of those days?

A phone call in the morning: "We're not acquainted … But I've come from Crimea, I'm calling from the train station. Is it far from you? I want to tell you my war …"

Really?!

And I was about to go to the park with my little girl. To ride the merry-go-round. How can I explain to a six-year-old what it is I do? She recently asked me: "What is war?" How do I reply? … I would like to send her out into this world with a gentle heart, and I teach her that one shouldn't simply go and pick a flower. It's a pity to crush a ladybug, to tear the wing off a dragonfly. So how am I to explain war to the

child? To explain death? To answer the question of why people kill? Kill even little children like herself. We, the adults, are as if in collusion. We understand what the talk is about. But what of children? After the war my parents somehow explained it to me, but I can't explain it to my child. Can't find the words. We like war less and less; it's more and more difficult to find a justification for it. For us it's simply murder. At least it is for me.

I would like to write a book about war that would make war sickening, and the very thought of it repulsive. Insane. So that even the generals would be sickened …

My men friends (as opposed to women) are taken aback by such "women's" logic. And again I hear the "men's" argument: "You weren't in the war." But maybe that's a good thing: I don't know the passion of hatred; my vision is normal. Unwarlike, unmanly.

There is a concept in optics called "light-gathering power"—the greater or lesser ability of a lens to fix the caught image. So, then, women's memory of the war is the most "light-gathering" in terms of strength of feelings, in terms of pain. I would even say that "women's" war is more terrible than "men's." Men hide behind history, behind facts; war fascinates them as action and a conflict of ideas, of interests, whereas women are caught up with feelings. And another thing: men are prepared from childhood for the fact that they may have to shoot. Women are not taught that … They are not prepared to do that work … And they remember other things, and remember differently. They are capable of seeing what is closed to men. I repeat once more: their war has smell, has color, a detailed world of existence: "They gave us kit bags and we made skirts out of them"; "I went into the recruiting office through one door wearing a dress, and came out through the other wearing trousers and an army shirt, with my braid cut off, and only a little lock left on my forehead …"; "The Germans gunned down the village and left … We came to the place: trampled

yellow sand, and on top of it one child's shoe …" 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." But I'm convinced that such things cannot be invented. Who could they be copied from? If that can be copied, it's only from life; life alone has such fantasy.

Whatever women talk about, the thought is constantly present in them: war is first of all murder, and then hard work. And then simply ordinary life: singing, falling in love, putting your hair in curlers …

In the center there is always this: how unbearable and unthinkable it is to die. And how much more unbearable and unthinkable it is to kill, because a woman gives life. Gives it. Bears it in herself for a long time, nurses it. I understood that it is more difficult for women to kill.

Men … They reluctantly let women into their world, onto their territory.

At the Minsk tractor factory I was looking for a woman who had served in the army as a sniper. She had been a famous sniper. The newspapers from the front had written about her more than once. Her Moscow girlfriends gave me her home phone number, but it was old. And the last name I had noted down was her maiden name. I went to the factory where I knew she worked in the personnel department, and I heard from the men (the director of the factory and the head of the personnel department): "Aren't there enough men? What do you need these women's stories for? Women's fantasies …" The men were afraid that women would tell about some wrong sort of war.

I visited a family … Both husband and wife had fought. They met at the front and got married there: "We celebrated our wedding in the trench. Before the battle. I made a white dress for myself out of a German parachute." He had been a

machine gunner, she a radio operator. The man immediately sent 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 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.

Yes, they cry a lot. They shout. Swallow heart pills after I am gone. Call an ambulance. But even so they beg me: “Come. Be sure to come. We’ve been silent so long. Forty years …”

I realize that tears and cries cannot be subjected to processing, otherwise the main thing will be not the tears and cries, but the processing. Instead of life we’re left with literature. Such is the material, the temperature of this material. Permanently off the charts. A human being is most visible and open in war, and maybe also in love. To the depths, to the subcutaneous layers. In the face of death all ideas pale, and inconceivable eternity opens up, for which no one is prepared. We still live in history, not in the cosmos.

Several times women sent back my transcribed text with a postscript: “No need for small details … Write about our great Victory …” But “small details” are what is most important for me, the warmth and vividness of life: a lock left on the forehead once the braid is cut; the hot kettles of kasha and soup, which no one eats, because out of a hundred persons only seven came back from the battle; or how after the war they could not go to the market and look

at the rows of red meat … Or even at red cloth … “Ah, my good girl, forty years have already gone by, but you won’t find anything red in my house. Ever since the war I’ve hated the color red!”

I listen to the pain … Pain as the proof of past life. There are no other proofs, I don’t trust other proofs. Words have more than once led us away from the truth.

I think of suffering as the highest form of information, having a direct connection with mystery. With the mystery of life. All of Russian literature is about that. It has written more about suffering than about love.

And these women tell me more about it …

Who were they—Russians or Soviets? No, they were Soviets—and Russians, and Belorussians, and Ukrainians, and Tajiks …

Yet there was such a thing as Soviet people. I don’t think such people will ever exist again, and they themselves now understand that. Even we, their children, are different. We want to be like everybody else. Not like our parents, but like the rest of the world. To say nothing of the grandchildren …

But I love them. I admire them. They had Stalin and the Gulag,[fn4] but they also had the Victory. And they know that.

I received a letter recently: “My daughter loves me very much; I am a heroine for her. If she reads your book, she will be greatly disappointed. Filth, lice, endless blood—that’s all true. I don’t deny it. But can the memory of it possibly engender noble feelings? Prepare one for a great deed …?”

More than once I’ve realized:

… our memory is far from an ideal instrument. It is not only arbitrary and capricious, it is also chained to time, like

a dog.

… we look at the past from today; we cannot look at it from anywhere else.

… they, too, are in love with what happened to them, because it is not only war, but also their youth. Their first love.

I listen when they speak … I listen when they are silent … Both words and silence are the text for me.

—This isn't for print, it's for you … The older people … they sat on the train deep in thought … Sad. I remember how one major began talking to me during the night, when everybody was asleep, about Stalin. He had drunk a lot and became bold; he confessed that his father had already spent ten years in the camps without the right of correspondence.[fn5] Whether he was alive or not, no one knew. This major spoke terrible words: "I want to defend the Motherland, but I don't want to defend that traitor of the revolution—Stalin." I had never heard such words … I was frightened. Fortunately, by morning he disappeared. Probably got off …

—I'll tell you in secret … I was friends with Oksana, she was from Ukraine. It was from her that I first heard of the horrible hunger in Ukraine. Golodomor.[fn6] You couldn't even find a frog or a mouse—everything had been eaten. Half the people in her settlement died. All her younger brothers, her father and mother died, but she saved herself by stealing horse dung at the kolkhoz[fn7] stable by night and eating it. Nobody could eat it, but she did: "When it's warm it's disgusting, but you can eat it cold. Frozen is the best, it smells of hay." I said, "Oksana, Comrade Stalin is fighting. He destroys the saboteurs, but there are many." "No," she

said, “you’re stupid. My father was a history teacher, he said to me, ‘Someday Comrade Stalin will answer for his crimes …’ ”

At night I lay there and thought: What if Oksana is the enemy? A spy? What am I to do? Two days later she was killed in combat. She had no family left, there was no one to send the death notice to …

I touch upon this subject carefully and rarely. They are still paralyzed not only by Stalin’s hypnosis and fear, but also by their former faith. They cannot stop loving what they used to love. Courage in war and courage of thought are two different courages. I used to think they were the same.

The manuscript has been lying on the desk for a long time …

For two years now I’ve been getting rejections from publishers. Magazines don’t reply. The verdict is always the same: war is too terrible. So much horror. Naturalism. No leading and guiding role of the Communist Party. In short, not the right kind of war … What is the right kind? With generals and a wise generalissimo? Without blood and lice? With heroes and great deeds? But I remember from childhood: my grandmother and I are walking beside a big field, and she tells me: “After the war nothing grew in this field for a long time. The Germans were retreating … And there was a battle here, it went on for two days … The dead lay next to each other like sheaves. Like railroad ties. The Germans’ and ours. After rain they all had tear-stained faces. Our whole village spent a month burying them.”

How can I forget that field?

I don’t simply record. I collect, I track down the human spirit wherever suffering makes a small man into a great man. Wherever a man grows. And then for me he is no

longer the mute and traceless proletarian of history. With a torn-off soul. What then is my conflict with the authorities? I understood—a great idea needs a small human being, not a great one. A great one is superfluous and inconvenient for it. Hard to process. And I look for them. I look for small great human beings. Humiliated, trampled upon, insulted—having gone through Stalin's camps and treachery, these human beings came out victorious. They performed a miracle.

But the history of the war had been replaced by the history of the victory.

They themselves will tell about it …

SEVENTEEN YEARS LATER

2002–2004

I'm reading my old journal …

I'm trying to remember the person I was when I was writing this book. That person is no more, just as the country in which we then lived is no more. Yet it is that country that had been defended and in whose name people had died in the years '41 to '45. Outside the window everything is different: a new millennium, new wars, new ideas, new weapons, and the Russian (more exactly, Russian-Soviet) man changed in a totally unexpected way.

Gorbachev's perestroika began …[fn8] My book was published at once, in an astonishing printing—two million copies. This was a time when many startling things were happening, when we again furiously tore off somewhere. Again into the future. We still did not know (or else forgot) that revolution is always an illusion, especially in our history. But that would come later, and at the time everybody was drunk with the air of freedom. I began to receive dozens of letters daily, my folders were swelling. People wanted to talk … to finish talking … They became more free and more open. I had no doubt that I was doomed to go on writing my

books endlessly. Not rewriting, but writing. A full stop immediately turns into an ellipsis …

I think that today I would probably ask different questions and hear different answers. And would write a different book—not entirely different, but still different. The documents (the ones I deal with) are living witnesses; they don't harden like cooled clay. They don't grow mute. They move together with us. What would I ask more about now? What would I like to add? I would be interested in … I'm hunting for the word … the biological human being, not just the human being of time and ideas. I would try to delve deeper into human nature, into the darkness, into the subconscious. Into the mystery of war.

I would write about my visit to a former partisan fighter. A heavyset but still beautiful woman. She told me how her group (she was the oldest, plus two adolescents) went on a scouting mission and accidentally captured four Germans. They circled about in the forest with them for a long time. Ran into an ambush. It became clear that they would not be able to break through with the captives and get away, and she made a decision—to dispose of them. The adolescents would not have been able to kill them; they had been wandering together in the forest for a few days, and when you spend that much time with a person, even a stranger, you get used to him, he becomes close—you know how he eats, how he sleeps, what kind of eyes and hands he has. No, the adolescents couldn't do it. That became clear to her at once. So she had to kill them. She recalled how she did it. She had to deceive her own people and the Germans. She supposedly went to fetch water with one German and shot him from behind. In the head. She took another to gather brushwood … I was shocked to hear her tell it so calmly.