THE PEOPLE OF CHERNOBYL: A COMMUNITY OF LOSS IN SVETLANA ALEKSIEVICH'S *CHERNOBYL PRAYER*

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ABSTRACT

Svetlana Aleksievich conducted hundreds of interviews with those affected by the explosion at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant in Ukraine and her native Belarus and assembled them in her 1997 novel *Chernobyl Prayer. A Chronicle of the Future*. Aleksievich, awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2015, created a complex, polyphonic blend of oral history and literature and provided a fragmented and diverse narrative of memory, trauma, and victimhood. The article examines Aleksievich's rendition of the ways in which "the people of Chernobyl" convey their own understanding of this identity. The many voices of Aleksievich's novel coalesce to speak for what Serguei Oushakine calls *a community of loss*. The article traces the articulation of their identity: from the frustrated search for appropriate discursive tools and points of reference, to the explicit sense of having formed a unique social entity, a community. This transition is also a progression, through the process of articulation and analysis, from a negative identity, defined by loss and a radical change in status, to one enhanced by philosophical and environmental awareness. This is also a shift from the mainstream Soviet worldview and identity to other more complex, albeit less comforting perspectives.

KEYWORDS: Aleksievich, Chernobyl, identity, loss, trauma.

EL POBLE DE TXERNÒBIL: UNA COMUNITAT DE PÈRDUES A L'ORACIÓ DE TXERNÒBIL DE SVETLANA ALEKSIEVICH

RESUM

Svetlana Aleksievich va realitzar centenars d'entrevistes amb els afectats per l'explosió a la central nuclear de Txernòbil a Ucraïna i la seva Bielorússia natal i les va reunir en la seva novel·la de 1997 *L'oració de Txernòbil*. Una crònica del futur. Aleksievich, guardonat amb el Premi Nobel de Literatura el 2015, va crear una barreja polifònica complexa d'història oral i literatura i va proporcionar una narrativa fragmentada i diversa de la memòria, el trauma i el victimisme. L'article examina la interpretació d'Aleksievitx de les maneres en què «la gent de Txernòbil» transmet la seva pròpia comprensió d'aquesta identitat. Les moltes veus de la novel·la d'Aleksievitx s'uneixen per parlar del que Serguei Oushakine anomena una comunitat de pèrdua. L'article recorre l'articulació de la seva identitat: des de la recerca frustrada d'eines discursives i punts de referència adequats, fins a la sensació explícita d'haver format una entitat social única, una comunitat. Aquesta transició també és una progressió, a través del procés d'articulació i anàlisi, d'una identitat negativa, definida per la pèrdua i un canvi radical d'estatus, a una millorada per la consciència filosòfica i ambiental. Això també és un canvi de la visió del món i la identitat soviètica dominant a altres perspectives més complexes, encara que menys reconfortants.

PARAULES CLAU: Aleksievich, Txernòbil, identitat, pèrdua, trauma.

On April 26, 1986, the residents of a large area, spanning west from the Ukrainian towns of Pripyat' and Chernobyl, became a new entity —"the people of Chernobyl". Before the explosion at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant, they would have defined themselves traditionally: in terms of age, education, ethnicity, or employment.[1] Since the night of the disaster, when they were officially classified as "those who suffered from the Chernobyl catastrophe" (*postradavshie vsledstvie Chernobyl'skoi catastrophy*), this designation has shaped both their self-identity and their relationship with others.[2] In 1996, Svetlana Aleksievich conducted hundreds of interviews with people affected by the explosion in Ukraine and her native Belarus, only 10 miles north of the nuclear plant. She assembled the interviews in her 1997 novel, *Chernobyl Prayer. A Chronicle of the Future*. In this, as in her other novels, Aleksievich, awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2015, created a complex, polyphonic blend of oral history and literature and provided a fragmentated and diverse narrative of memory, trauma, and victimhood. I examine Aleksievich's rendition of the ways in which "the people of Chernobyl" convey their own understanding of this identity. The many voices of Aleksievich's novel coalesce to speak for what Serguei Oushakine calls *a community of loss*. United by a common traumatic experience and the search for ways to move forward, this community roots its post-disaster and post-Soviet identity in the shared sense of victimhood.

Aleksievich conducted the interviews ten years after the event; her novel, therefore, presents not an account of the actual explosion, but of the ways in which those affected learned to speak about it in the intervening years. *Chernobyl Prayer* is an account of the aftermath of a historical event that very deliberately poses historical knowledge as inherently messy, fragmented, and available only as sets of individual stories, rather than a coherent official narrative. The novel, however, is far from messy: it is meticulously organized to develop several core topics, including the respondents' fraught attempts to make sense of their experience as part of a personal history and that of their country. In author's interview with herself, Aleksievich states that her topic constitutes "the world of Chernobyl" and "the feelings, thoughts, and words" of its ordinary people (Aleksievich 2016: 24).[3]

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[1] For comprehensive account and analysis of the catastrophe at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant, see Plokhy (2018) and Brown (2019).

[2] See for instance Petryna (2002): "Over 3.5 million Ukrainian citizens have official "Chornobylets" status —legally defined as *poterpili* (sufferers) and qualifying for free medical care, cash subsidies, and other social services— but Ukraine's weak economy left many of them inadequately supported" (4).

[3] *Chernobyl Prayer. Chronicles of the Future* was first published in the literary monthly *Druzhba Narodov* in 1997. The book version came out in 2008: *Chernobyl'skaia molitva. Khronika budushchego* (Moscow). The publisher describes it as "edited by the author, containing new text and the fragments excluded from the original version because of censorship considerations" (publisher's note). I use the 2016 translation with occasional modifications for accuracy. Page numbers appear in parentheses.

Aleksievich's rendering of her respondents' attempts to make sense of what happened to them, to leave a record of their suffering and be recognized for it, has been analyzed from the viewpoints of genre and the truth-fiction divide. Scholars examine the ways in which she captures and problematizes the act of representing trauma by relying on familiar genres, such as prayer, death lament, and testimonial (Karpusheva 2017, Lindbladh 2017, Marchesini 2017, Oushakine 2016). I, too, focus on the process of representing trauma and relate it, more specifically, to the problem of identity as a key theme that Aleksievich develops on several levels: as a social, ideological, environmental, and narrative challenge. Her selection and arrangement of interviews emphasizes the quest for meaning and a stable identity by expanding and altering the very concept of victimhood. In the following, I trace the articulation of the identity of "the people of Chernobyl": from the frustrated search for appropriate discursive tools and points of reference, to the explicit sense of having formed a unique social entity, a community. This transition is also a progression, through the process of articulation and analysis, from a negative identity, defined by loss and a radical change in status, to one enhanced by philosophical and environmental awareness. This shift from a negative, or apophatic, definition to one that is relatively stable and positive (if without positive connotations) is also a shift from the mainstream Soviet worldview and identity to other more complex, albeit less comforting perspectives. And finally, I address the ways Aleksievich's signature genre —"a novel of voices"— responds to the narrative challenge of capturing the unfolding of the new identity.

"NO ONE CAN UNDERSTAND WHERE I'VE COME BACK FROM. AND I CAN'T TELL ANYONE". (82)

People speak of traumatic experiences because they seek, either intuitively or prompted by sympathetic audiences, to mitigate the impact of trauma by the very act of talking it through and giving the painful memories a manageable narrative form (Felman & Laub 1991, Caruth 1996, Davis & Meretoja 2020). Johanna Lindbladh's analysis of *Chernobyl Prayer* as testimony relates the genre to the cultural and psychological theories of trauma, which focus on the role of the narrative in working through individual and collective traumatic experiences. Indeed, as cultural sociologist Jeffrey Alexander points out, collective traumas may be articulated and interpreted according to different cultural scripts, but "the truth of a cultural script depends not on its empirical accuracy, but on its symbolic power and enactment" (Alexander 2012: 11). Neil Smelser similarly emphasizes that giving traumatic experience a narrative form is a necessary and

> often a prolonged process of collective groping, negotiation, and contestation over the proper historical meaning to be assigned, the proper affective stance to be adopted, the proper focus of responsibility, and the proper forms of commemoration. (Smelser 2004: 49)

Though twentieth-century history offers an abundance of "cultural scripts of trauma", the people of Chernobyl insist that none provided them with the "proper forms" of narration or "proper historical meaning". The need for, and inability to find, points of reference —historical and cultural— to describe the experience of Chernobyl is a recurring topic in *Chernobyl Prayer*: the nuclear disaster is an unheard-of event, because it leaves its victims without familiar cultural discourses, in which to situate their stories. In searching for the appropriate cultural scripts, Aleksievich's respondents invariably turn to stories of World War II, even as they acknowledge their unsuitability. Significantly, most respondents have no personal experience of war, and rely, quite openly, on images derived from literature and film:

> We drove insight. There was a sign saying "Prohibited Zone". I've never been at war, but it was sort of a familiar feeling. Like I had it somewhere in my memory. Where from? Something to do with death. (77)

> We were evacuated. My father brought the word home from work. It was like in the war books. […] We were leaving. The sky was as blue as can be. Where were we going? […] If this was war, then from the books I'd imagined it differently. (115)

> On 22 June 1986, armed with my belongings, a mess tin and a toothbrush, I showed up at 11:00 hours at the muster point. It struck me there were just too many of us for peacetime. Memories flashed through my mind from war movies. (194-95)

> We listened constantly to the radio. This way of behaving seemed familiar to me, even though I was born after the war. […] In some unfathomable way, I found I was remembering the experience of the war. (181)

> People are always comparing this to the war. War, though, you can understand. My father told me about the war, and I've read books about it. But this? (182)

In acknowledging the limits of this historical parallel, respondents engage in a kind of self-analysis: why, then, do we keep talking about the war? Indeed, the pervasiveness of war references is not as inevitable as it might seem, and not only because most respondents are too young to have experienced World War II.[4] Stories of natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods, and epidemics, even when they result in significant fatalities, are not inherently similar to war stories as humanity learned to tell them. Social scientists discuss disasters from political and scientific perspective as resulting from governments' decisions and social and political practices. Unlike wars, disasters are "rooted in the social structure of the community and reveal problems in the community rather than threaten the community from outside" (Xu 2016: 358). Scholars of memory similarly assume that memories of disasters are determined by internal factors, i.e., the affected groups' agendas, politics, and cultural values. What kind of politics and

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[4] I must add that since the beginning of Russia's war against Ukraine in February 2022, people in the Chernobyl region and in the whole of Ukraine have acquired a first-hand and exceedingly traumatic experience of war.

cultural values determine the people of Chernobyl's heavy reliance on war imagery?

Let us consider the case when memory or war and of disaster naturally coalesce: in Japan, the memories of two nuclear explosions, one during World War II, the other in 2011, merged into the story of national "nuclear victimhood" (Seaton 2016: 347). In popular imagination and in official commemorations, the victims of the explosion of Fukushima nuclear station in Japan's Tohoku region in 2011 were associated with the A-bomb's victims in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The emergency respondents who gave their lives to bring the reactor in Fukushima under control were described by the media as "kamikaze" (Seaton 2016: 347). The similarities of "nuclear victimhood" narratives, commemoration practices, and public debates helped to bring affected communities together by providing both the discursive frame for these events and the impetus to move forward and "work for the recovery of Japan" (Seaton 2016: 353). Whereas Japanese tendency to combine wartime narratives with those of contemporary nuclear explosion has an obvious explanation, the Soviet memory of World War II does not include an A-bomb. This discrepancy lays bare the reason for the predominance of the war parallels in the memories of the people of Chernobyl: by their own admission, Aleksievich's respondents think of war because it is the most significant, and the only available, story of death, heroism, suffering, and destruction. It reveals the paramount role of military rhetoric in Soviet ideological discourses throughout the post-World War II decades and beyond. Captured by war literature and film, reproduced in countless public speeches, commemorations, and spectacles the war comprised the foundational narrative of Soviet identity (Carleton 2011, Youngblood 2007).

Among the available stories of loss and sacrifice, war stories constituted the bulk of reading and viewing for the average person in the 1980s (Markwick 2012, Tumarkin 1994). These texts maintained the major postulates of Soviet ideology: the communal spirit, with its denial of value to an individual life, and the cult of sacrifice and heroism. Thus, the speakers feel betrayed by the very culture that formed their worldview and infused it with the Soviet ethos of courage and sacrifice.

> What else have I been teaching the children? Precisely that. You have to go into battle, rush into the line of fire, defend, sacrifice. The literature I was teaching was not about life: it was about war and death: Sholokhov, Serafimovich, Furmanov, Fadeev, Boris Polevoy… (181)

> They put on political sessions, told us we had to emerge victorious. Over what? The atom? Physics? The cosmos? Our nation treats victory not as an event but a process. Life is a battle. That's where our great love of floods, fires, and earthquakes comes from. We need a stage for our 'displays of courage and heroism.' Somewhere to hoist the flag. (103)

> At moments like that, the Russian people show how great they are. How special! We'll never be like the Dutch or Germans. And we'll never have good roads and groomed lawns. But we'll always have heroes. (85)

Soviet collective memory of war and the Chernobyl survivors' individual memories of the explosion failed to coalesce into a cultural explanatory script the way it did in Japan. Collective memory is both an aggregate of individual stories and a source for scripts and models by which people shape their own memories (Halbwachs 1980, 1992; Young 1993). This is usually a productive dynamic. Serguei Oushakine shows how after the war in Afghanistan,

> stories about the nation and the country were used as a major organizing plot for individual accounts: these personal feelings acquired a socially recognizable narrative structure. (Oushakine 2016: 5)

His interviews with Afghan war veterans and their families demonstrate that

> stories about the nation and the country were used as a major organizing plot for individual accounts: these personal feelings acquired a socially recognizable narrative structure. (Oushakine 2016: 6)

By contrast, Aleksievich's respondents feel that their stories do not fit any such recognizable structures. They find the war comparison limited: the enemy is invisible, and the effects of radiation cannot be terminated by a peace treaty. As one emergency respondent (*liquidator*) puts it, "When I made it back from Afghanistan, I knew I'd live. Here it was the opposite: it'd kill you only after you get home" (75). The many similar remarks compiled make explicit the need to deal with the unknown by reverting to the familiar and, more importantly, the frustration with the familiar Soviet cultural discourses, in this case, war books and films.

Soviet ideological commonplaces lost their explanatory power at the time of the Chernobyl explosion and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the two events that are linked in the minds of Aleksievich's speakers (Plokhy 2018). The author makes this point in the opening self-interview:

> Two disasters coincided: a social one as the Soviet Union collapsed before our eyes, the giant Socialist continent sinking into the sea; and a cosmic one —Chernobyl. Two global eruptions. (32)

Ten years after the event, most respondents are no longer interested in blaming the government for the silence, outright lies, and the technological unpreparedness to deal with the disaster. Rather, Aleksievich brings forth the voices of the people of Chernobyl who put the blame almost solely on the ethos of heroism and self-sacrifice that permeated their culture, because it proved unable to give them the proper symbolic structures and narrative tools to work through their own trauma. Yet at the same time, they feel robbed of the opportunity to write their experience into the grand narrative of Soviet and world history, as another story of heroism and suffering. Deprived of this step, they feel not only that their pain was not recognized but also, and more importantly, that it has not been given a higher meaning.

"I'VE THOUGHT A LOT ABOUT THESE THINGS. SEARCHING FOR MEANING, AN ANSWER". (210)

The effort to textualize trauma is essentially the effort to infuse it with meaning by linking individual experiences with national cultural scripts. With Soviet ideological clichés obsolete, and nothing yet to replace them, the people of Chernobyl were forced to engage in two equally torturous grief processes: like most Soviet people, they mourn the old explanatory system with its grand ideas, in addition to which, however, they feel excluded from the process of making new narratives because of the sheer unintelligibility of their experience:

> I want to understand! […] No - to go through such suffering without there being any meaning to it, to have to rethink so much, is wrong. Impossible! (Starts shouting) […] Without those wonderful words we knew so well. (213, 217)

The old ideals —and words— prove inadequate, but no new postulates emerge to fill the void:

> We live surrounded by thoughts of war, the collapse of Socialism and an uncertain future. But we need to rethink our future, we suddenly found ourselves without a great future. There is a lack of new ideas, of new goals and ideals. (225)

On the one hand, the people of Chernobyl share the bewilderment of their countrymen:

> We believed in it! We believed in heroic ideals, in the Soviet victory. And that we would vanquish Chernobyl! […] What are we without ideals? Without some grand vision. […] People have to be motivated, inspired. (245)

On the other, they feel that their world, the Chernobyl world, is too unimaginable to be written into a big idea discourse: "it's an episode still outside our culture. Too traumatic for our culture" (98).

In this vacuum of meaning, ideals, and aspirations, Chernobyl is simultaneously a monument to lost culture and ideology, and a challenge for its people to imbue it with new meaning, independent of old cultural symbolism and pathos. Smelser maintains that "trauma may be community- and identity-disrupting or community- and identity-solidifying —usually some mixture of both" (Smelser 2004: 44). Shedding the old identity as Soviet citizens, subject to Soviet ideological and cultural constructs, Aleksievich's respondents feel that they have no choice but to embrace the one identity available to them —the people of Chernobyl.

> A great empire came apart at the seams, collapsed. First there was Afghanistan, then Chernobyl. When the empire disintegrated, we were on our own. I hesitate to say it, but… we love Chernobyl. We have come to love it. It is the meaning of our lives, which we have found again, the meaning of our suffering. Like the war. (268-269)

This statement brings together the major points of the old ideology: imperial posture and the cult of war and suffering. With the shift from "I" to "we", the speaker, like many other respondents, poses the quest for meaning as a collective effort. It is significant, however, that the "we" of "we love Chernobyl" is different from the "we" of the collective subject of Soviet ideology, infused with communal spirit remarked on by the same respondent: "we always say 'we' rater than 'I' […] We began learning to say 'I'" (268). For the people of Chernobyl, the acceptance of Chernobyl as negative meaning becomes, paradoxically, a step toward developing a positive group identity (Mirnyi 2009).

"I AM A CHERNOBYL PERSON (*CHERNOBYLETS*). AS IF WE'RE SOME SORT OF SEPARATE PEOPLE. A NEW NATION". (136)

"Chernobyl survivors", the term commonly used in English, emphasizes the outcome and the fact of staying alive. However, the word Aleksievich's respondents use, *chernobyltsy* —people of Chernobyl— has neither positive nor negative value: it simply lumps thousands of people into a category defined exclusively by having been affected by the explosion, either as residents, or those involved in the clean-up, the liquidators. This definition is a blank page, initially filled with content by journalists, official media accounts, the popular imagination, rumors, and fears (Mirny 2004, Fialkova 2001). Ten years after the explosion, the people of Chernobyl generate this content with statements ranging from expressions of resentment at being ostracised, to those of pride in their new positive identity as a community. In Oushakine's terms, this is "a community of loss", and for such communities,

> questions of political responsibility [are] eventually displaced by collective practices of grief and discourses of bereavement, as if no positive content could function as a basis for a sense of belonging, and a community must envision a shared experience of loss in order to establish its own borders. (Oushakine 2016: 5)

This new identity, the speakers feel, has been thrust on them suddenly, and irrevocably:

> You are living your life. An ordinary fellow. A little man. […] And then just like that you've turned into Chernobyl person. A curiosity! Some person that everyone shows interest in, but nobody knows much about. You want to be the same as anyone else, but it's no longer possible. People look at you through different eyes. They ask you questions. […] In the beginning, we all turned into some kind of rare exhibits. Just the word *Chernobyl* still acts as an alarm. They all turn their heads to look at you. "Oh, from that place!" (44)

> They were frightened of us. "Where are you from?" "Chernobyl". And they would slide away from our compartment and not let their children run past us. (115)

> From the very beginning, we had a sense that we people from Chernobyl were now outcasts. Other people were afraid of us. The bus we were traveling in stopped for the night at a village. Evacuees were sleeping on the floor in a school or at a club and there wasn't

> an inch of spare space. One woman invited us to stay with her. "Come, I'll make a bed for you. I feel sorry for that son of yours". Another woman nearby pulled her away from us. "You are crazy!" she said. "They are infectious!" (192-193)

Fear and ignorance turn the evacuees into pariahs. Traditionally, victim groups might rely on outsiders' compassion and help, or at least, acknowledgement. In this respect, the people of Chernobyl find their situation unique once again because, while people sympathize, they also fear them. The identity of "a Chernobyl person" means the trauma cannot be relegated to the past, not only psychologically, as would be the case with victims of war, genocide, and natural disasters, but also physically, in a very real sense: the effects of radiation they carry with them are seen as a continuing threat by outsiders.

The alienating effect of the lack of understanding by those outside the community is further intensified by the fact that people on the inside have no answers either: the outsiders looking in cannot possibly understand, and the insiders find it both imperative and impossible to articulate their experience. They feel they carry a knowledge and unique experience that is impossible to put into words: "a feeling arose in all of us —whether voiced or unvoiced— that we have touched on the unknown. Chernobyl is a mystery that we have yet to unravel" (25). This sense of tragic exceptionality has disrupted their relationship with others, but solidified the sense of a new identity. The claim of possessing a unique knowledge that cannot be expressed, and that is shared only by those in the same group, serves as a foundational notion for the new community. The sudden absence of familiar societal bonds forced the people of Chernobyl to form stronger kinships amongst themselves, as a unique community sharing the same hurt, frustrations, and fears. Like Oushakine's war veterans, they are united by "the differential deployment of pain that brings these groups together at the same time as it sets them apart from others" (Oushakine 2016: 12). They keep in touch and keep track of deaths and marriages. Like all communities, they share stories of origins and achievements, stories filled with pain, but also humor, love, and even pride.

In many ways, the stories told by the people of Chernobyl rhyme with other narratives of victimhood —a category so vast that sociologists have dubbed contemporary western culture "a victim society". The Chernobyl community's concept of victimhood is not unique, but it possesses the typically post-Soviet quality of rejecting Soviet cultural myths in favor of broader philosophical considerations such as national history and the cult of suffering. When a respondent muses that "we Belarusians never had anything eternal (*vechnogo*). […] but now finally it has been bestowed on us. Our eternal is Chernobyl" (241) and insists that the essence of Belorussian national character and history is suffering: "Our gods are martyrs […] Other than suffering we have nothing. No other history, no other culture" (242), she is engaging in a shift from ideology to philosophy. She is not alone; many respondents note that Chernobyl made philosophers out of them: "it beggars the imagination. […] You feel the urge to

be philosophical. It doesn't matter who you speak to about Chernobyl, everybody feels that urge to philosophize" (171). Most Chernobyl "philosophers" consider suffering as essential to the identity of the Chernobyl person:

> It is a perplexed generation that lives with Chernobyl. We are dismayed. The only thing that has not changed here is human suffering. That is our only currency —non-convertible of course. (179)

Even an outsider expresses his negative view of the people of Chernobyl by engaging the same notions:

> On the one hand, there is the nihilism, the rejection, and on the other, fatalism. They have no faith in the government. They don't trust scientists and doctors, but they don't do anything for themselves. They are innocent and vacant. They have found meaning and justification of their existence in suffering. Nothing else seems to matter. (269)[5]

Aleksievich gives equal emphasis to her respondents' dissatisfaction with Soviet ideological constructs and their engaging with notions of suffering, history, and identity; in effect she shows the progression from one to the other. The shift provides the people of Chernobyl with a philosophical foundation for a post-Soviet and non-ideological group identity. This identity rests largely on the claims of victimhood and suffering, but also, and even more interestingly, on the notion of freedom.

"AND NOW I AM A FREE MAN" (76)

Most people affected by the explosion left the Chernobyl area and have since rebuilt their lives elsewhere. Meanwhile, those whose voices Aleksievich chose to represent, were unable to escape Chernobyl in more ways than one. Having experienced ostracism, and bonded by the common sense of loss, those people of Chernobyl who have remained claim a peculiar sort of freedom. In practical terms, they are free of others' fears and the need to start their lives anew, someplace else. However, as a group, they have developed a philosophical stance as well: in positioning Chernobyl as the last refuge for all sufferers, they solidify their identity as a community of loss, but also of freedom.

> We had the choice of moving away, but my husband and I thought it over and turned it down. We're afraid of other people; whereas here, we're all just the people of Chernobyl, together. We're not afraid of each other. If someone offers you apples or cucumbers from their plot, you accept it and eat them. We don't politely put them away in a pocket or bag and throw them away afterwards. We have a shared memory, the same fate. And anywhere else we're regarded as outsiders. (231)
>
> Chernobyl. There is not going to be a different world for us. At first, when the ground has been torn from under our feet, we gave open expression to our pain; but now we live with

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[5] On the concept of suffering in Aleksievich's novels see Gapova (2015).

the realization that there is no other world for us, and we have nowhere else to go. The sense of having settled, tragically, on this land —it's a completely different worldview. (179)

Even more significant is the attention given by Aleksievich to the category of respondents, who came to the area by choice, because they have no place anywhere else. For refugees from the former Soviet republics in Central Asia, Chernobyl is the only place where they feel safe. They escape ethnic conflicts into the world where the demarcation line is emphatically different:

> World has split in two: there is us, the people of Chernobyl, and you, everyone else. Have you noticed? We don't make a point oh his "I'm Belorussian", "I'm Ukrainian", "I'm Russian". Everyone juts calls themselves Chernobyl people. (135)

A Russian woman from Tajikistan says: "Why did we come here? To the Chernobyl Zone? Because no one will kick us out. From this land. It's nobody's, God has taken it over. People have deserted it" (68). There is a monologue by a wanderer who comes to the area because here he feels free:

> I was running. Running from the world. First, I hung out at the railway stations. I liked the stations because there were loads of people, but you were alone. Then I read about it in the newspapers —and came here. There is total freedom here. I'd say it's heaven. (73)

He concludes his monologue with "and now I am a free man" (76). This kind of desperate freedom is possible if one views the land of Chernobyl as having acquired a sacred status: abandoned by people but claimed by God. The land claimed by God becomes the refuge for those who are not accepted by people: namely, Chernobyl Zone residents and refugees from the former Soviet Republics. For them, Chernobyl is a territory of freedom and tolerance.

The chapter "Three monologues about the ancient fear, and on why one man stayed silent while the women spoke" comprising the stories by refugees from Central Asia is situated early in the book, it is not an afterthought. "There is a war there", the woman from Tajikistan says,

> now it's neighbor shooting neighbor, boys who went to school together, and now they're killing each other, raping the girls they sat next to in school. Everyone has gone crazy. […] So we came here. To Belarus. […] We are left without a homeland, we don't belong anywhere. (65-67)

A mother of five from Kyrgyzstan gives the same reasons, concluding that: "This is where we're going to live. It's our home now. Chernobyl is our home. Our motherland. (She suddenly smiles.)" (72-73).

The refugees feel abandoned by Russia and by the "friendship of people" Soviet narrative:

> We don't belong anywhere. The Germans left for Germany, the Tatars went to Crimea when they got permission, but nobody needed Russians. […] To be honest, I don't actually

feel that Russia is my Motherland; we were brought up with a different idea: that our Motherland was the Soviet Union. (67)

Having seen the real war, not one in film or books, the refugees fear men, not radiation:

> When we first got here, we asked "Where is this radiation of yours?" "It's right where you're standing". But that's the whole land itself! […] I don't find it as scary as it was there. […] It was war. You can't explain it to someone who doesn't know what war is, only knows it from the movies. (67-68)

The people who escaped the visible enemy —"It's man I'm afraid of. Men with guns" (73)— for the invisible one in Belarusian lands affected by radiation might not have another place to go, but in claiming Chernobyl as motherland rather than temporary refuge they make a conscious choice. The trajectory from "Our motherland is the Soviet Union" to "Chernobyl is our home. Our motherland" is the same as that taken by the "native" people of Chernobyl: from the abstractly communal spirit of the Soviet ideology to their own group identity. It involves a choice not only between the types of danger but also between the types of victimhood.

The view of their land as a territory of freedom modifies the narrative of victimhood in a significant way by giving agency to the people who chose to come, or come back, to the area. While the identity as people of Chernobyl has been thrust upon them by the explosion or by the collapse of the Soviet Union, they have imbued it with notions extending beyond victimhood and its lack of subjectivity. In effect, the people of Chernobyl claim a positive identity, based on reconceptualizing the notion of victimhood: from one of a bewildered object to that of a cognizant and active interpreter of one's experience.

"THE CONTAMINATION WAS NOT ONLY IN OUR LAND BUT IN OUR MINDS" (208)

The people of Chernobyl extend their notion of victimhood to include the land and all living beings. An early chapter with a poetic title "Monologue of a village on how they call the souls from heaven to weep an eat with them" intertwines the voices of seven elderly people, who defied the evacuation orders and returned to their village near Gomel in Belarus. The chapter speaks to the powerful pull of the land, and of the freedom found when everything has been lost.

> In our village the people live together. As one community.
> It may be poisoned with radiation, but this is my home. There's nowhere else we're needed. Even a bird loves its nest.
> By day we lived in the new place, but at night we went back home. In our dreams. (48)
>
> I had two cows and two heifers, five pigs, some geese and chickens. And a dog. […] There were so many apples! Everything's lost. Damn, it's all gone! (49-50)

> We returned together with our cats. And dogs. We came back together. (52)
>
> Freedom! We like it. (55)

Aleksievich's positioning of these voices early in the novel gives them additional weight. Coming before the many stories of death told by heartbroken wives and parents, they claim the loss of one's land, house, and livestock as equally devastating. The speakers in this chapter are the elderly and, significantly, peasants, whose lives have always been linked to natural cycles. For them the land is both sacred and a very real source of livelihood, it nourishes them and suffers with them.

Through several interviews, Aleksievich's respondents interconnect ecology and ideology: "The contamination was not only in our land but in our minds. That had been going on, and would continue, for years" (224). The relationship with the land that had been taken for granted by generations of peasants did not survive Chernobyl: the villagers cannot perceive their land as hostile, but this is exactly what has been asked of them. The metaphor of contamination reinforces Aleksievich's interpretation of the ecological disaster as a failure of ideology. The people of Chernobyl's claim to a special relationship with their land is rooted in history and tradition and endures through the perception of a common victimhood: both are betrayed by the non-democratic state and its ideology. An environmental inspector discusses the bond between the land —beautiful but now poisoned— and the people working it. To her, the land and the people are equally victims of a crime:

> I feel most sorry for the people in the villages —they were real victims, as innocent as children. Chernobyl was not something any peasant had invented. They had their own relationship with nature, a trusting, not predatory, attitude. Just like a hundred years ago, or a thousand, in accordance with God's providence. They could not understand what happened. […] And they were constantly being told: "Everything is fine". […] we had all been complicit. In a crime. (Falls silent). (208)

Many of the respondents remember the beauty of the land. The realization that this land is now poisoned, is among the most difficult to accept. One respondent says:

> Before, we never noticed the world around us. It was like the sky, like the air. As if someone had handed it to us forever. […] I used to love lying down on the grass in the forest admiring the sky. It felt so good that I could forget my own name. But now? (132)

Another remembers how

> we were burying the forest. […] Like it was alive; living rolls of earth. […] But all of this land is so beautiful. Such grandeur. The horror was made all the worse by that beauty. And human beings just had to get out of there. They had to flee like villains, or criminals. (101-103)

The people of Chernobyl's claim to this land, and their many declarations of love for it, position the area's natural environment as another victim of the disaster and the common denominator in many stories. Just as people feel ill-treated by the state and its ideology, they see the land as a fellow victim of the nuclear catastrophe and of the Soviet ideology, with its ethos of subjugating natural forces, including the atom, to human will:

> We were brought up in a particular kind of Soviet paganism. Man was almighty, the crown of creation. He had the right to do whatever he pleased with the world. […] Defying history, defying nature. (212)

Animals, from house pets to cows and pigs, are part of the expanded circle of the community of loss. In HBO mini-series *Chernobyl* (2019) that is largely based on Aleksievich's novel, among the most heartbreaking episodes is the one where soldiers exterminate abandoned pets: cats and dogs. The corresponding chapter in the novel, "Three monologues on the 'walking ashes' and the 'talking dust'" is indeed devastatingly sad:

> We had to shoot at point-blank. So, this bitch was in the middle of the room with her puppies. She went for me —I put a bullet in her. The puppies were licking my arms, being all sweet and playful. We had to shoot at point-blank. Saints preserve us! There was this one dog, a little black poodle. I still feel sorry for it. (109)

On the one hand, the people are the perpetuators of the crime of killing animals, on the other, they are unwilling villains who are forced by orders, and plagued by emotions. The old villagers who refuse to give up their cows are misguided but consistent in their views of livestock and land as an integral part of their lives:

> "Get rid of the cow, old girl. The milk is poisoned". "Oh, I can't do that", I said, crying. "What with my legs aching and my knees hurting. I'm not giving the cow away. She keeps me fed". (53-54)

In these circumstances, no one is a criminal, and everyone is a victim. The blame is diffused when the suffering affects everyone, from people to livestock, to poisoned land. This diffusion affects the way the people of Chernobyl expand their understanding of group identity: in sharing their plight with the timeless phenomena of the natural world they imbue it with deeper philosophical meaning.

"YOU CAN WRITE THE REST YOURSELF. I DON'T WANT TO TALK ANY MORE". (82)

A liquidator explains how he became a photographer in the Zone: "Why did I take up photography? Because words were not enough…" (307). Time and again Aleksievich's respondents claim inability to relate what happened to them: they don't have the words —"I am not a writer, I am a witness" (44)—, or choke up talking about tragedies such as death and sickness —"I am not going to say

anything else. I'll start crying" (72). *Chernobyl Prayer* is an attempt to give voice and, with it, agency to the people who cannot speak. Aleksievich claims she has not altered any of the interviews and did not "write the rest" for any of her interlocutors.[6] What is the author's role then? And why does it matter whether the reader perceives her text as an unmediated record or a work of art? At issue is the problems of representing the revaluation of entrenched Soviet cultural narratives at the moment of their collapse.

Aleksievich's choice of genre in all her novels is a way to deconstruct official narratives of history by breaking their monolithic visions into fragments of individual testimonials. The novels *The Unwomanly Face of War* and *The Last Witnesses: A Hundred Unchildlike Lullabies* (both 1985) deconstruct the official narrative in two ways: they focus on the war experiences of women and children, respectively, suggesting thereby that the official version of the war is an incomplete "men's" version, and they depart from the conventions of literary form (Coleman 2017). Unconventional literary forms are best suited to narrativize shock, trauma, and horror; in other words, to narrate the unspeakable.

The subtitle of Aleksievich's novel is *A Chronicle of the Future*. The term "chronicle", while not antithetical to literary form, is usually associated with history records. It should not surprise us that the author of a comprehensive history of the Chernobyl catastrophe, the Harvard historian Serhii Plokhy, relies equally on archival materials and on "accounts of other writers, such as Svetlana Aleksievich and Yurii Shcherbak" (Plokhy 2018: xi). Readers of Aleksievich's novel will recognize some of her interlocutors in Plokhy's account. Shcherbak's "Chernobyl. Documentary tale (*povest'*)" came out a year after the event, in 1987. It incorporates numerous interviews with people affected by the catastrophe; in this respect Shcherbak, like Aleksievich after him, consciously privilege the recorded witness accounts over more familiar, fictional forms. In fact, Shcherbak opens with a metaliterary commentary positing that only direct transfer of the authentic human voice can capture the truth of the event:

> Turning these recordings into text, I strove to preserve the structure of speech, the peculiarities of terminology or jargon, and the intonations of these people, resorting to editing only when absolutely necessary. It seemed very important to me to preserve the documentary and uncontrived character of these human confessions. I wanted the truth to be preserved. (Shcherbak 1988: 7)

Moreover, he insists, familiar literary genres with their conventions of plot and composition would obscure that truth:

> After what I learned and saw in Chernobyl, there was a time it seemed I would never take up my pen again: all traditional literary forms, all the subtleties of style and intricacies of

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[6] This claim might be disputed. Thus, for instance, there are important differences between the original 1997 version and the 2008 book version. Reflecting significant changes in ideological and cultural situation in Belarus, Ukraine, and Russia, these differences deserve a separate study.

composition —it all seemed to me infinitely remote from the truth, it all seemed artificial and useless. (Shcherbak 1988: 6)

For Shcherbak, the interview is the only literary form capable of capturing the truth of the experience very soon after the event, almost in real time. The time for epic, he says, will come later but even then "we will require new approaches, new literary forms, different, let us say, from *War and Peace* or *Quiet Flows the Don*. What will those approaches and forms be? I do not know" (Shcherbak 1988: 3). Writing ten years later, Aleksievich had the time to reflect and perhaps consider what these new literary forms could be, but she keeps her preferred one that claims the authenticity of related emotion by breaking with conventions of realist literature. Both writers see themselves as record keepers, someone who is entrusted with the truth by the bearers of the experience; they therefore search for literary forms capable of accommodating the chronicle-like authenticity and still function as literature, that is, an artform whose relationship with reality is more complex than that of a record of historical events.

Aleksievich is explicit about her method: she selects and arranges her material, in other words, she goes through the same steps as most writers. When an interviewer asks her: "where is your presence? In the principles of montage? In the dosage of the documents?" Aleksievich replies:

> First, there is rhythm. These are the signs of the soul. Rhythm is the most important thing when it comes to the inner life of a person... In general, the craft is a mystery. The second, of course, is the selection of material. There should be two things here: the truth of time and an insight about the person as a whole. […] I concentrate [the material], collect it in the image of time. (Aleksievich 1996: 210)

In an often-quoted interview with the radio station *Echo of Moscow*, Aleksievich states:

> I'm writing within a new genre, in which both of these aspects [document and artistic form] are co-existing. […] —I call it a 'novel of voices' [*roman golosov*]. It is in other words a documentary-artistic genre. This means that I'm writing a novel, but in a completely different language, based on, you could say, documentary material. (Aleksievich 2017)

In all metaliterary statements, Aleksievich simultaneously alludes to the document —art divide and insists that her method bridges it. What is at stake in these discussions is the attempt by the post-Soviet writers to distance themselves not only from the spirit of Soviet ideology but also from its letter. They must search for points of reference and literary forms that engage with reality in ways radically different from those employed in *War and Piece* and *Quiet Flows the Don* (from Shcherbak's remark). Genre forms that hover on the line between fiction and non-fiction break up the monolithic vision of a realist novel; in this respect Aleksievich, just like her respondents, disassociate herself from conventions and genres of Soviet culture with its predilection for the realist novel and ideological engagement. *Chernobyl Prayer* must perform the same transition to post-Soviet

worldview and identity and, in the process, part not only with the Soviet ideology but with the very forms used to carry it.

CONCLUSION

Aleksievich's novel begins and ends with stories of love and death. In the first and last chapters, entitled "A Solitary Human Voice", two women mourn their husbands. In between, the multitude of individual perspectives supplants the official accounts of the ecological and social aftermath of the Chernobyl nuclear explosion with "a chorus of individual voices" (Aleksievich 2017). The voices in the text are arranged to represent a group with a well-defined identity. The community formed by the people of Chernobyl was forced to develop a group identity under unique circumstances, unaided by familiar national cultural scripts, and feared by others. Adding to their plight, public interest in the story of the Chernobyl disaster and its aftermath was quickly redirected toward other powerful narratives: the fall of the Soviet Union, a flood of exposé literature and explosive journalism about the horrors of the Russian revolutions and World War II, the crimes of the Soviet regime, the wars in Afghanistan and Chechnya, and the economic hardship of the early post-Soviet years. Those affected by the nuclear explosion were as impacted and disoriented by these as everyone else in the first post-Soviet decade; but the added imperative of textualizing their own trauma provided a foundation for a common, positive identity.

Aleksievich outlines the links discussed above quite explicitly. Her novel, while upholding its claims to the authenticity of all its individual voices, nevertheless develops a set of interrelated themes, including the relationship between a community of loss and an undemocratic state, between ideological and environmental pollution, and between desperation and freedom. In emphasizing the narrative aspect of trauma, Aleksievich demonstrates how the universal need to talk about traumatic experiences, coupled with the lack of appropriate narrative forms, pushes people to rethink their worldview, to reconstruct it, in a way that would accommodate their experiences. Her respondents follow the trajectory from the Soviet ideological cult of heroism to the existential cult of suffering. It might appear that they simply substitute one cultural myth for another. The reality is, however, more complex: the new non-ideological worldview is explicitly humane because it affirms the value of all life, of people, animals, and nature, and poses tolerance and compassion as essential values. Ultimately, the people of Chernobyl are a community, united by a common sense of victimhood, the land to which they ascribe a sacral meaning, and the philosophy of terrible freedom.

One sign of the extent to which this identity is fixed, is its commercial potential. Numerous computer games exploit Chernobyl's "post-apocalyptic mystery" (Plokhy 2018, Bodrunova 2012, Goatcher & Brunsden 2011). Before Russia's war against Ukraine, at least one tourist agency in Kyiv offered "tours

to the Chernobyl exclusion zone" with stops at the towns of Chernobyl and Pripyat', a command center, and a buried village. The elderly living in the area have accepted their role, and perfected their lines, as tourist exhibits.

> I notice how the old women themselves have changed, too. Some have become real movie stars. They've memorized their lines, and will shed a tear in just the right places. When the first foreigners came, they used to say nothing, just weep. Now, though, they learned to talk. With a bit of luck, there'll be some chewing gum for the children, or a box of clothing might come their way. Who knows? And this coexists with a philosophical profundity, with the fact that they have a special relationship here with death, with time. (271)

Yet, the head of the local Women's Committee, who makes this comment, shows no contempt; on the contrary, she sees it as a sign of empowerment. Indeed, the old women who finally "learned to talk" have found a way to tell their own story: they have, in effect, created a cultural script to accommodate it. The old women who can monetize the story of their victimhood are no longer merely victims, rather, they become the record keepers for a community with a well-defined identity.

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