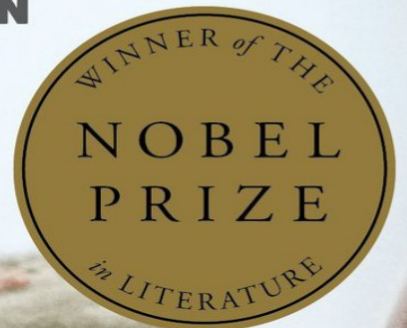


SVETLANA ALEXIEVICH

THE UNWOMANLY FACE OF WAR



**AN ORAL HISTORY OF WOMEN
IN WORLD WAR II**



Translated by **RICHARD PEVEAR** and **LARISSA VOLOKHONSKY**



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THE
UNWOMANLY
FACE
OF WAR

AN ORAL HISTORY OF WOMEN
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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* 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...

* The Russian poet and writer Nikolai Karamzin (1766–1826) was the author of a masterful twelve-volume *History of the Russian State*.

A HUMAN BEING IS GREATER THAN WAR



*Millions of the cheaply killed
Have trod the path in darkness...*

—OSIP MANDELSTAM^{*1}

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^{*2} 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.*³ 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