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## *Book Review*

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**Svetlana Alexievich. *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets*. Translated by Bela Shayevich. New York: Random House, 2016. ISBN-10: 0399588809 - 496 pp.**

In 2015, the annual Nobel Prize in Literature went to a little-known Belarusian (Ukrainian-born) writer Svetlana Alexievich for her nonfiction book *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets*. Unlike some famous, short-listed for the Prize nominees (for instance, Haruki Murakami), Alexievich is hardly known not only in the international literary circles, but even in her own country or among Russian readership, in the language of which she writes. The Net search will render surprisingly few hits for the writer, and those few will provide only the basic biographical information and some quotes from Alexievich's books and speeches. Though her stories were made into films, literary critics have not yet addressed her writing with a thorough analysis.

Neither would I, describing the book for this journal. In my short review I will not dwell on the literary accomplishments of the book, but rather try to answer the following three questions hopefully interesting for the reader. First, what exactly has secured the book such an honorable award as the Nobel Prize? Second, why is this book, in my opinion, worth reading? And, finally, why might it be instrumental for understanding certain current political and economic developments on the international scene?

So, why is the Nobel Prize? In their commendation, the Nobel Prize Committee stated that Alexievich has been given the award "for her polyphonic writings, a monument to suffering and courage in our time." The permanent secretary of the Nobel Committee Sara Danius paid tribute to the power of her work, saying that: "For the past 30 or 40 years she's been busy mapping the Soviet and post-Soviet individual. But it's not really a history of events. It's a history of emotions. What she's offering us is really an emotional world. So these historical events that she's covering in her various books—for example the Chernobyl disaster or the Soviet war in Afghanistan—are, in a way, just pretexts for exploring the soviet individual and the post soviet individual. She's conducted thousands of interviews with children, women and men, and in this way she's offering us a history of a human being about whom we didn't know that much." [1]

The book presents a broad oral history of Soviet and post-Soviet Russia. In her narrative, Alexievich weaves a tapestry of numerous voices, recalling their past, sharing their tragedies and shattered hopes, and reciting their current fears and despondency. "I'm searching life for observations, nuances, details," states Alexievich in the epigraph to her homepage,—"because my interest in life is not the event as such, not war as such, not Chernobyl as such, not suicide as such. What I am interested in is what happens to the human being, what happens to it in of our time. How does man behave and react. How much of the biological man is in him, how much of the man of his time, how much man of the man" [2].

In one of her own interviews, Alexievich stated that she has been searching the answer to one eternal, typically Russian question: Why doesn't people's suffering translate into freedom? For each of her books, the one under the review included, she interviewed about 700 people, from different generations, from those, who witnessed the 1917 Revolution and went through the wars and Stalinist gulags, to those, who have fought in Afghanistan, Chechnya, survived Chernobyl and now are being trapped under the ruins of the great

empire. “I compose my books out of thousands of voices, destinies, fragments of our life and being,” states Alexievich—“This is a story of one Soviet-Russian soul” [2]. Chronologically and geographically her tapestry covers such a vast territory that Rachel Donadio described the scope of Alexievich’s narration as “Tolstoyan, while calling the author the “Nobel laureate of Russian misery” [3].

The author’s life itself, her own suffering and courage, also deserve praise and appreciation. During her lifelong career in journalism Alexievich has written numerous short stories and reportage, in which she has covered the Chernobyl catastrophe, the Soviet war in Afghanistan and many other events—all based on thousands of interviews with witnesses. In her five encyclopedic volumes of oral history of postwar Russia she has been unreservedly honest, sparing neither authorities nor personalities. She has been persecuted by Lukashenko’s dictatorial regime, which made her leave Belarus in 2000. For eleven years she lived in exile in Paris, Gothenburg and Berlin, and could only return to Minsk in 2011, where, she hopes, her international recognition might render her some protection from further persecution. As Claire Armitstead (2015) noted in her review, “the Nobel jury decided to make an award to a journalist whose entire oeuvre, spanning more than 30 years, could be read as a sustained attack on the authorities, at first in the Soviet Union and more recently in Belarus and Ukraine, and their overbearing neighbour, Russia” [4].

Coming to my second question of why the book is worth reading I can vouch that it will not leave anyone indifferent. Every story is full of so much distress, shattered dreams, broken lives that it is hard to believe that the experiences that people narrate to the author could be real. Blogging their reaction to the book readers call the stories “maddening,” “irrefutable,” “heartrending.” But this is the strength of the book—it is documentary, and it reveals the history, which has really happened, the history hidden behind official propaganda and governmental embellishment. We hear the voices of victims, voices of executionists and voices of accomplices—and they all are Soviet people, “all the participants of the socialist drama” (p. 3). Alexievich calls them *Homo sovieticus*, a special, easy to spot species: “People who’ve come out of socialism are both like and unlike the rest of humanity—we have our own lexicon, our own conceptions of good and evil, our heroes, our martyrs.... We’re full of hatred and superstitions. All of us come from the land of gulag and harrowing war. Collectivization, dekulakization, mass deportations of various nationalities...” (pp. 3-4). This is the history that Alexievich presents in her book, and she is weaving it out of individual stories, multiple “miniature expanses,” which together make a history of “domestic,” “interior” socialism.

These are the stories of people who during Holodomor, Stalin’s genocidal extermination of the Ukrainian farmers, witnessed whole villages dying of starvation, while Moscow holidaymakers, loaded with fruit and wine, merrily passed them by on their way back from the Crimea. There are also stories of more recent past, when the “Great Brotherhood of Peoples” fell apart with the collapse of the Soviet Union, and those former “brothers” dashed on each other with unthinkable atrocities. And there are voices of contemporary Russians, most of whom go to glamorous supermarkets like to museums to see the wealth much beyond their means while their children cry coming back home from school: the sneakers they have overgrown years ago are too tight, but their parents cannot afford a new pair. You will hear from these people that all propaganda about the greatness of Russia is a total lie, invented by the “phony patriots” sitting in front of their “zombie box”: “They should come see what it’s like fifty kilometers outside of Moscow... Look at the houses, see how people live... There’s practically no men in the village; they’ve all died out... they drink themselves to death. Until they collapse” (p. 109).

Alexievich’s tapestry is made of many such voices and their numerous stories, and it draws a picture of the “secondhand life,” with its small and big tragedies, a story of some human happiness and much more suffering. It is about history and human destinies crashed by it. But most importantly it is about a person’s soul—“it’s where everything really happens” (p. 4).

Finally, why can this book be informative for understanding of the current state of international affairs, where one of the most influential players is ambiguous and unpredictable Russia? The reason for this claim

is that in her book Alexievich draws a comprehensive snapshot of the predominant mentality of Russian masses brainwashed by a dangerous ideology, playing on poverty, despondency and hurt national pride. An important thing about modern Russia that everybody should be aware of is that at the background of the mass disillusionment with capitalism, with its inequality, poverty, and shameless wealth, Russia is going through the resurrection of everything Soviet: “Old-fashioned ideas are back in style: the Great Empire, the ‘iron hand’, the ‘special Russian path’” (p. 11). Listen to the voices of ordinary people in the book—in their hopelessness, many people pray for Stalin to come back, or in lieu of him, President Putin, who claims to restore Russia to its former grandeur. These voices can help you understand how Putin manages to hold his grip on a country of 143 million people across 11 time zones.

“In the West, people demonize Putin,” Alexievich said in a recent interview at the University of Gothenburg. “They do not understand that there is a collective Putin, consisting of some millions of people who do not want to be humiliated by the West,” she added. “There is a little piece of Putin in everyone.” [1].

This understanding should probably throw a bucket of pessimism on anybody’s expectations that Russia would eventually return the Crimea back to Ukraine, when so many voices in the Alexievich’s tableau lamented the loss of the Crimea and Sevastopol right after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In this context, should Prime Minister Abe ever seriously envisage the return of the disputed islands to Japan no matter how much effort he would put into his meetings with Putin? Aggressive Russian militarism can be better understood knowing the thinking of many people, who risked their lives in Afghanistan or Chechnya and later were left misplaced in the new capitalist environment of modern Russia. They are now ready to go back to war—against anybody—be it their former brother nation, Ukraine, or distant Syria. Shooting down the passenger plane in the skies of Ukraine or ignoring a desperate plea of Aleppo people not to strike the same area twice a day to let them care for the dead and wounded—who are those monsters with a famously “mysterious Russian soul”? The answer is in the book: they are not monsters, they are ordinary Homo sovieticus and “at heart,—writes Alexievich,—“we are built for war. We were always either fighting or preparing to fight. We’ve never known anything else—hence our wartime psychology” (p. 4).

Alexievich has reconfirmed this diagnosis in her Nobel Lecture, when she said that “a time full of hope has been replaced by a time of fear” and that Russia has missed the chance to become a country “where people can live decently,” choosing instead to become “a strong country.” In other words, Russia chose to be strong over worthy, and now “the era has turned around and headed back in time. The time we live in is secondhand” [4], hence the name of the book.

“A Nobel Prize of Misery,” “Secondhand Time,” is a difficult book to read; it will haunt you for a long time if you are not indifferent to human suffering. It is also a very revealing narrative of the people who, once you hear their stories, will become closer, more understandable to you. And perhaps you will no longer see them as villains but rather as victims—victims of many beautiful dreams shattered but still holding on to yet another illusionary one, mightily fed to them by yet another dream fabricator. Listen to the voices of the last Soviets, and perhaps you will get much better understanding of one of the major players on the contemporary political arena, Putin’s Russia.

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