



Svetlana Alexievich, Oct. 14, 2013. Elke Wetzig/Wikipedia Creative Commons

The Literature in the Journalism of Nobel Prize Winner Svetlana Alexievich

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Abstract: For the first time the Nobel Prize in Literature has been awarded for literary journalism as revealed in the work of Belarusian author Svetlana Alexievich. Fundamentally, her approach has been to juxtapose the everyday details of life against the secular mythologies of the state. Moreover, she makes it clear that the intention of her journalism is to be literary. As such, she is part of a larger Russian tradition, as well as a tradition practiced in the Soviet Union and other communist countries during the Cold War. The following is excerpted and adapted from the author's forthcoming book, *Literary Journalism and the Aesthetics of Experience*, to be published by the University of Massachusetts Press in 2016. Permission to reprint passages from the volume is gratefully acknowledged.

There is a scene in Svetlana Alexievich's account about the Soviet war in Afghanistan in the 1980s when a wife recalls how she and her soldier-husband got married. They go to the marriage registry office in their village:

They took one look at us in the Village Soviet and said, "Why wait two months. Go and get the brandy. We'll do the paperwork." An hour later we were husband and wife. There was a snowstorm raging outside.

"Where's the taxi for your new wife, bridegroom?"

"Hang on!" He went out and stopped a Belarus tractor for me.¹

Such is how one wife recalls the nature of their admittedly modest nuptials, riding away with her husband not in a limousine (much less a taxi) as one might today, but in a snowstorm on a farm tractor. But the scene takes on a powerful poignancy, because we know that her husband has died in Afghanistan.

And such is the nature of Alexievich's literary method, to explore how

larger ambitions in the form of secular mythologies—in this case, the Soviet Afghanistan venture—had, in the details, so devastatingly scarred people's psyches.

The announcement in October that Alexievich had received the Nobel Prize for Literature was, of course, a validation for scholars of a narrative literary journalism. A review of past recipients since the award was established in 1901 reveals that she is the first journalist, and indeed literary journalist, to receive what is undoubtedly the most distinguished recognition in the world for literary endeavor.² This is not to suggest that earlier recipients did not engage in journalism. But the award is given for an author's collected works, and what we can detect is that most recipients have been primarily authors of fiction, drama, and poetry. Ernest Hemingway was awarded the Nobel, but despite his work as a journalist (and literary journalist), he established his reputation as a novelist and short story writer. Moreover, his *The Old Man and the Sea* was singled out as the most recent of his efforts at the time; clearly, his journalism was not on the award committee's collective mind. There were some nonfictionists, such as Winston Churchill, who received the award. But it was largely for his work as a historian, biographer, and orator. What makes Alexievich's oeuvre so distinctive is that her work is composed almost exclusively of a narrative literary journalism, or the semantic variants of literary reportage and reportage literature.³ But such is her ambition. As she has observed of her method, "Documentary prose ought to transcend the strict boundaries between the formats of literature and journalism."⁴ She is seeking, then, to violate boundaries.

And yet she remains largely unknown, at least in the United States, precisely because of the formats established by the academy's boundaries. The lack of recognition is revealed in the lack of scholarship about her in the major bibliographies. A review of the MLA International Bibliography, the bibliography dedicated to literary study, reveals not a single entry on Alexievich in peer-reviewed scholarly journals.⁵ But the literature academy is not the only guilty party. The same is true of the journalism academy, and more broadly the communication academy in which journalism and other media are often housed. There is not a single entry to be found in the journals of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, the largest learned society in the United States dedicated to the interests of journalism.⁶ The absence serves as an indictment: We detect that these sectors of the academy continue to wear disciplinary blinders and are incapable of looking beyond their constricting boundaries to see a literary journalism that has now been awarded one of the most distinguished awards in the world. And this is, of course, because Alexievich does not hesitate to violate and subvert those boundaries.

In the following I will examine Alexievich's *Zinky Boys* to reveal what

makes her literary journalism so distinctive—and indeed distinguished. My focus is on the manner of her writing and her ambition to challenge secular mythologies by means of the details of everyday life, or what I call the “aesthetics of experience.” Moreover, I examine how she intends clearly for her journalism to be literary, and how her work fits into a larger tradition extant not only in Russia, but also in Communist countries prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union.

A Challenger of Secular Myths

Alexievich (also transliterated as “Alexiyevich”)⁷ was brought to the attention of the anglophone world with the excerpt “Boys in Zinc” taken from her volume *Zinky Boys*.⁸ “Boys in Zinc” appeared in 1990 in the British magazine *Granta*, a significant outlet for literary journalism in the 1980s and 1990s. The same year saw the full book-length version published in Russian and Belorussian. The English translation, *Zinky Boys*, appeared in 1992. The excerpt and book provide an account of how Soviet citizens coped with the deaths of husbands, sons, and friends serving with the Soviet military in the Afghanistan. “Zinc” refers to the regulation zinc coffins in which the bodies were sent back to the Soviet Union.

Prior to the book’s publication in Russian, Alexievich was more widely known in the Soviet Union during the period of late Soviet decline as the author of *War’s Unwomanly Face*, an account of the memories of Soviet women from World War II.⁹ Since *Zinky Boys*, her other English-language publication is *Voices from Chernobyl*, published in 2005, initially published in Russian in 1997.¹⁰ *Voices from Chernobyl* provides an account of the survivors of the Chernobyl nuclear reactor accident in nearby Ukraine in 1986.

Although Alexievich is a Belorussian national, her literary language is equally Russian, which served of course as the lingua franca of the Soviet Union.

In “Boys in Zinc” and *Zinky Boys* Alexievich provides vignettes or sketches of the survivors for what in sum amounts to a kind of narra-descriptive polyphony: “They are not documents; they are images. I was trying to present a history of feelings, not the history of the war itself.”¹¹ We can see this in a moving example involving Tamara Dovnar, the wife of an army officer killed in the war, after he had told her, “You can’t imagine how much I don’t want to die for someone else’s country.”¹² When she arrives with his parents at an airport to pick up his coffin, this is what she found:

“We’ve come to collect . . .”

“Over there,” he pointed over to a far corner. “See if that box is yours. If it is, you can take it.”

There was a filthy box standing outside with “Senior Lieutenant Dovnar” scrawled on it in chalk. I tore the board away from where the window should be in a coffin. His face was in one piece, but he was lying in there unshaven, and nobody had washed him. The coffin was too small and there was a bad smell. I couldn’t lean down to kiss him. That’s how they gave my husband back to me. I got down on my knees before what had once been the dearest thing in the world to me.¹³

“Boys in Zinc,” I should emphasize, is not strictly a formal interview—Alexievich interviewing Tamara Dovnar in, for example, a standard Q&A. Alexievich’s style reconstructs not only the event but also how the event is told, so that it appears that the narrator—the Soviet wife Tamara—is speaking directly to us. But unlike in fiction, Alexievich is not creating a fictitious narrator. Rather she is giving “voice” to an identifiable speaker. Indeed, Alexievich describes such a form as a “voice genre.”¹⁴

Alexievich has selected details that would resonate more deeply across Soviet and Russian culture than, say, American. In the case of Soviet culture, they are details that assault official mythologies. For example, “And at that time people continued to talk and write about our internationalist duty, the interests of state, our southern borders.”¹⁵ In “internationalist duty” and “interests of state” we detect patriotic euphemisms. In effect, they were euphemistic totalizations elevated to mythic stature in the Soviet Union. (Even “southern borders” takes on a mythic status, because borders are designed to keep out what challenges myth as a self-contained and global totality.) They reflect, as Joseph Brodsky said of euphemism, the inertia of terror,¹⁶ a terror that becomes refracted through the revealing narra-description or stories Soviet citizens shared with Alexievich. It is here that she begins to undermine or break down myth, countering it with what the young soldiers and their families confronted in an open-ended or inconclusive reality, one for which the myth did not and could not account. As Alexievich notes: “The censors saw to it that reports of the war did not mention our fatalities. There were only rumours of notifications of death arriving at rural huts and of regulation zinc coffins arriving at prefabricated flats. I had not meant to write about war again, but I found myself in the middle of one.”¹⁷

Among other examples, an army private recalls, “They lined us up on the square and read out the order: “You’re going to the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan to do your internationalist duty.” And, “Before our first battle they played the Soviet National Anthem.” But such totalized invocations of “internationalist duty” and the “National Anthem” sounded hollow because of what the secular mythology could not account for: “After the battle we scraped our own guys off the armour plate with spoons. There weren’t any

identification discs for fatalities.”¹⁸ The phenomenal particulars undo the myths to which the Soviet government had attached the ship of the Soviet people’s lives. The familiar comforts of the myths have been confronted with the unfamiliar for which they cannot account.

A military nurse recalls: “They told us it was a just war. We were helping the Afghan people to put an end to feudalism and build a socialist society.” But it is the horror of amputated limbs “just dumped” that begins to unmask the myth for what it is: a death machine.

Twice a week we had political indoctrination. They went on about our sacred duty, and how the border must be inviolable. Our superior ordered us to inform on every wounded soldier, every patient. It was called monitoring the state of morale: the army must be healthy! We weren’t to feel compassion. But we did feel compassion: it was the only thing that held everything together.¹⁹

Thus the myths of “sacred duty” (invoked in the name of an officially atheist state, no less), “inviolable borders,” and building a “socialist society” are subverted by the seemingly simple but powerful response of a visceral heart-wrenching compassion, one that takes on an ultimate value for the speaker.

A regimental press officer recalls: “Out there you felt quite differently about your country. ‘The Union,’ we called it. It seemed there was something great and powerful behind us, something which would always stand up for us.”²⁰ But eventually the myth of “Union,” the totalitarian state as totalized signification, is inadequate in accounting for the phenomenal realities of war.

Similarly, the myths propagated by the media are revealed as no more than misleading media constructions:

I remember, though, the evening after one battle—there had been losses, men killed and men seriously injured—we plugged in the television to forget about it, to see what was going on in the Union. A mammoth new factory had been built in Siberia; the Queen of England had given a banquet in honour of some VIP; youths in Voronezh had raped two schoolgirls for the hell of it; a prince had been killed in Africa. The country was going about its business and we felt completely useless. Someone had to turn the television off, before we shot it to pieces.²¹

What, figuratively, they wanted to shoot to pieces were the euphemistic myths of a country “going about its business” propagated by the Soviet evening news, which could not begin to reflect the horror of war even if it wanted or were permitted to do so.

But as the example of Tamara Dovnar illustrates, the myths were challenged not just on the battlegrounds of Afghanistan. More important for Alexievich’s account, they were being challenged and subverted at home, because, as S. Elizabeth Bird and Robert Dardenne have noted of myth in jour-

nalism, “telling it like it was supposed to mean,” in this instance back in the comparative safety of the “Union,” was beginning to emerge as a lie.²² This is what “the Union,” that myth of what was to be an Edenic dictatorship of the proletariat, had come to, challenged by the open-ended present of experience.

Then there are the details that would resonate more deeply across Russian culture, lying like a palimpsest beneath the Soviet. For example, the matter of the husband’s body going unwashed is more than just one of hygiene and respect for the dead. Instead, the ritual washing of the dead is a necessary and sacred rite in Russian Orthodox funerals because it helps to release the soul from the body.²³ Similarly, the kissing of the dead is another important rite in Russian funeral culture.²⁴ In a sense what Tamara Dovnar was doing was returning to the older Russian cultural mythologies of her grandmothers in a repudiation of the Soviet.²⁵ That she had at least some knowledge of religion (as did many Russians during the Soviet period) in that officially atheistic state is reflected in her recollection that before she married she had a dream on Epiphany, which in the Russian Orthodox Church is the date of Jesus’s baptism. She dreamed that she would marry a man in uniform.²⁶ She knew what Epiphany was, and here we see the undoing of secular Soviet myth with, in this instance, a more ancient mythos.

“Who Are We, and Where Are We Going”

Alexievich makes it clear that what she is attempting to do is indeed intended to be literary. This is because she is reflexively literary in a way that we do not often see, at least with American authors; indeed, from an American perspective, she may appear too consciously aspiring to be literary. Because “Boys in Zinc,” as it appeared in *Granta*, is composed of excerpts, what is lost from editorial elisions are the literary references. In the complete volume *Zinky Boys*, the initial chapter that much of “Boys in Zinc” is adapted from serves to frame the book as not only a journalistic undertaking but as a literary one as well. Eleven literary references are deleted from the chapter in the *Granta* version, which are references to writers, poets, and literary critics. The first is to Shakespeare’s *Richard II*, with the quote “Each substance of grief hath twenty Shadows.”²⁷ Then in succession Alexievich cites the critic Yuri Karyakin, Franz Kafka, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Alexander Pushkin, Mikhail Lermontov, Dostoevsky again, Leo Tolstoy, singer-songwriter-poet Vladimir Vissotsky, Dostoevsky still again, and poet Boris Slutsky.²⁸ Shakespeare, Kafka, Dostoevsky, Pushkin, Lermontov, and Tolstoy should need no introduction. Karyakin, Vissotsky, and Slutsky are less well known in the West.²⁹ Also notable in the English translation of the book is that except for pages one and eight, every page through the first ten contains at least one reference to a

figure of some literary import. What Alexievich is suggesting, then, in invoking such an accomplished roster is that journalism can indeed be literary. This is not to say that Americans do not make literary references. They often do as epigraphs prior to the start of the narrative. Truman Capote does it with *In Cold Blood*.³⁰ What is perhaps unique from an American perspective with regard to Alexievich is how frequent such references are in the first ten pages of the text.

It is the nature of the quotes—direct and indirect—from her literary sources that reveals her intent to undermine Soviet mythologies by means of a literary investigation. Shakespeare, the first, makes reference to multiplicities of meaning beyond the source of each trauma: “Each substance of grief hath twenty Shadows.” As an illustration, the Soviet state informed loved ones of the deaths in cursory fashion, as if the cursoriness—like euphemism’s avoidance of terror—would decrease the pain, at least for the messenger. “In fulfillment of my duty as a soldier, I have to inform you that Senior Lieutenant Valerii Gennadievich Volovich was killed today at 1045 hours,” reads one telegram quoted in “Boys in Zinc.”³¹ What could not be stemmed in the fulfillment of one’s “duty” were the haunting “shadows” of grief that hovered above the cursory bureaucratise of the telegram.

With that as an introduction, Alexievich continues to build her case that hers is to be read as a literary document, one that consistently assaults secular mythologies. She quotes from Karyakin: “We should not judge a man’s life by his perception of himself. Such a perception may be tragically inadequate.” In the inadequacy we detect what humans cannot know about themselves. Alexievich adds, “And I read something in Kafka to the effect that man was irretrievably lost within himself.” Thus, among other interpretations, we see the age-old admonition against hubris—of the fall from grace through one’s overweening pride. Of the mythos associated with the warrior in the form of martial splendor and heroism, Alexievich writes, “Dostoevsky described military men as ‘the most unthinking people in the world.’” So she attacks, not so indirectly, the Soviet army, liberator of civilization, in one mythology, from fascism during the Great Patriotic War, as World War II was called in the Soviet Union and in Russia today. Later, “To write (or tell) the whole truth about oneself is a physical impossibility, according to Pushkin.”³² In other words, the global or totalized conception of oneself is not possible, and we detect an excess beyond knowing, this from Pushkin, widely regarded as Russia’s greatest poet.³³

Alexievich’s invocation of Lermontov engages in a role reversal. The Soviet military, ostensibly a civilizing force, is reduced to engaging in barbarities. Alexievich writes:

In Lermontov's [fictional] *A Hero of Our Times*, Maximych [the framing narrator, who makes available the "diaries" of the main and now dead protagonist Pechorin] says of the mountain-tribesman who has killed Valla's father: "Of course, according to their lights he [the killer] was completely in the right"—although [Alexievich as author is speaking again] from the Russian's point of view the deed was quite bestial. Lermontov here pinpointed the amazing ability of Russians to put themselves into other people's shoes—to think according to their "lights," in fact.³⁴

To be bestial and commit atrocities, in other words. Alexievich's observation from *A Hero of Our Times* is reinforced later on the same page: "In Dostoevsky's novel *Ivan Karamazov* observes: 'No man can be as cruel, so exquisitely and artificially cruel, as man.'"³⁵ Such is the myth that an army can be "civilizing" in the name of one's "internationalist duty."

She cites Tolstoy's observation that "man is fluid," in the sense that in the interests of the State, that global conception, he is expendable. Vissotsky, again less known in the West, was a poet and songwriter. Alexievich listens to a tape cassette of "Afgantsi" songs sung by Soviet Afghan veterans that express their contempt for the ideals—the myths—that sent them to Afghanistan. "Childish, unformed voices, trying to sound like Vissotsky, croaked out: 'The sun set on the *kishlak* [Afghan village] like a great big bomb'; . . . 'Amputees like big birds hopping one-legged by the sea'; . . . 'There's no hatred in his face now he's dead.'"³⁶

Alexievich quotes Boris Slutsky, one of the Soviet war poets of World War II who rose to prominence during the cultural thaw after the death of Stalin in 1953: "When we returned from war / I saw we were needed no more."³⁷ Such is the dim view she presents of the Afghan venture.

But there is still an additional dimension to Alexievich's literary intentions, again intentions perhaps difficult to appreciate from the American pragmatic perspective but very much inherent in her invocation of Russian literature, which is strongly inflected with a philosophical and even spiritual dimension. I do not mean to make the argument that the literary modernists and New Critics tried to make, that literary meaning can be essentialized. Rather, I am discussing a perception in Russian letters. One detects this when Alexievich invokes the Christian existentialist (and deeply devout Russian Orthodox) thinker Nikolai Berdyaev, who was also a Dostoevsky scholar. Toward the end of the first chapter she quotes Berdyaev: "Russian writers have always been more interested in truth than beauty."³⁸ The quote is notable not only for the preference it expresses, truth over beauty, but also because it challenges what for so long in anglophone culture served those intent on a transcendental literature, namely the conclusion to Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," which has for some belletristic aesthetes come to represent the "essence"

of literary aesthetics: “Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.”³⁹ Berdyaev is rejecting the Western view that the study of aesthetics is the study of the beautiful, and suggesting that truth can be something different. If there is any beauty, it is in the revelation of whatever “truths,” or insights as I would prefer, are revealed. (Nor should the conclusion to Keats’s poem be mistaken for the aesthetic principle several lines earlier that makes an irony of those famous final lines, namely, that the aesthetic “teases us out of thought” with the possibilities of meaning; truth as beauty and beauty as truth are ironic because we can never know if that is the case if we are forever teased out of thought.) More to the point, in an example of how the literary and the spiritual (or metaphysical) invest Russian literature, Berdyaev said, in a volume about Dostoevsky, that the author of *Crime and Punishment*, *Notes from the Underground*, and *The Brothers Karamazov*, among others, “has played a decisive part in my spiritual life. . . . He stirred and lifted up my soul more than any other writer or philosopher.”⁴⁰

So Alexievich firmly plants herself in the tradition of Russian literature. Having done so, she is led to ask a fundamental question: “Who are we, and where are we going?” The question is directed at “Russian literary people.” But it could only resonate broadly with all Soviet readers. Following the question, she makes clear that secular myth is indeed the object of her attack: “And it dawns on us that nothing, not even human life, is more precious to us than our myths about ourselves. We’ve come to believe the message, drummed into us for so long, that we are superlative in every way, the finest, the most just, the most honest.”⁴¹ Much as the New Journalists often assaulted the values underlying American culture, she is attacking the values underlying Soviet culture. And those who doubt, she adds, will be accused of “treachery.”

On the next page she quotes Berdyaev again: “I have always been my own man, answerable to no-one.” Thus he positions himself outside the state, which of course would not endear him to the Soviet regime, which reviled him. Alexievich responds to Berdyaev’s quote: “Something which can’t be said of us Soviet writers. In our day truth is always at the service of someone or something.” Or of the Soviet Union, for that matter, or of one’s “internationalist duty,” or of any of the other myths she assaults. Then she writes, “Dostoevsky insisted: ‘The truth is more important than Russia.’” Furthermore, after Dostoevsky she invokes the Bible: “Take heed that no man deceive you. For many shall come in my name, saying I am Christ.”⁴² Alexievich adds, “Russia has had to suffer so many false Messiahs—too many to mention.”⁴³ Lenin, Stalin, Rasputin, Boris Godunov, the false Dmitry, among others. And that, after all, was a major underlying theme in much of Dostoevsky’s work, especially *The Possessed* (also translated as *The Devils*), and in the chapter on the

Grand Inquisitor in *The Brothers Karamazov* (Moreover, it was this chapter that proved such a powerful influence on Berdyaev's own spiritual views).⁴⁴

So we detect an array of literary influences in the opening chapter. One need not subscribe to the view of literature as spiritually or metaphysically transcendent in order to understand that literature in Alexievich's view has a moral or philosophical dimension. And that is the insight that an examination of Alexievich provides: her literary values frame her examination.

Reportage Literature as Subversion

We should bear in mind, too, that her work was part of a larger enterprise in the Soviet Union, as well as other Communist countries under Soviet domination during the Cold War. In the Soviet Union there was, of course, the older tradition of the Russian *ocherok* stretching back to the early nineteenth century.⁴⁵ As Charles Laughlin has observed of the Chinese variant, "What makes reportage literature fascinating is precisely its ability to satisfy . . . different expectations, especially in that through its commitment to concrete experience it resists easy assimilation into the machines of propaganda. That is, although it is ironically a form of great importance and treasured by the Chinese Communist Party, it possesses within it more than other forms, such as fiction and poetry, the potential to critique the shortcomings of the socialist order it helped bring about."⁴⁶

The same has been observed of Communist Eastern Europe. As Susan Greenberg writes, "The long, post-war years of communist censorship are commonly credited as a source of perverse inspiration for the writers of the former Soviet bloc, providing practice in the literary game of disguising universal meanings in the detail of the text."⁴⁷ The result was a resistance against and subversion of the existing political order. Still elsewhere, Sonja Merljak Zdovc has detected similar circumstances in the Slovene tradition, strongly influenced by the communist experience when Slovenia was part of Tito's Communist Yugoslavia: "Since journalists could not openly state their opinion of the political system, they wrapped it up in a feature story that had elements of short stories from the era of social realism. When painting the picture of poverty, they actually criticized the socialist authorities."⁴⁸ The "painting" of the aesthetics of experience provided the indictment.

Clearly, subversion is at the heart of Alexievich's "new reality" in *Zinky Boys*, confronting what the Soviet authorities did not want to acknowledge: the personal impact of the Afghan war on the lives of Soviet citizens. Again, as Alexievich observes: "Every confession was like a portrait. They are not documents; they are images. I was trying to present a history of feelings, not the history of war itself."⁴⁹

John C. Hartsock's first book, A History of American Literary Journalism (2000), received awards for outstanding scholarship from both the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication and from the American Journalism Historians Association. It has also been published in Romanian. He has lectured widely on the subject of narrative/literary journalism, and his articles have appeared in Prose Studies, Genre, Points of Entry, Journal of Communication Inquiry, and Critical Studies in Mass Communication. The founding editor of Literary Journalism Studies, his second book, Seasons of a Finger Lakes Winery (2011), won a first-place Gourmand Award in Paris for excellence in wine writing. Hartsock teaches at the State University of New York at Cortland and at the Umbra Institute in Perugia, Italy.



Notes

1. Svetlana Alexiyevich, "Boys in Zinc," trans. Arch Tait, *Granta* (Autumn 1990): 151.

2. http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/.

3. John C. Hartsock, "Literary Reportage: The 'Other' Literary Journalism," in *Literary Journalism across the Globe*, eds. John Bak and Bill Reynolds (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011), 24–25.

4. Lettre Ulysses Award, 2003, www.lettre-ulysses-award.org.

5. Accessed October 12, 2015, five days after the Nobel announcement: <http://libproxy.cortland.edu:2062/ehost/resultsadvanced?sid=3f1e71f7-ffba-432e-a513-14af4528a607%40sessionmgr120&vid=12&hid=113&bquery=Alexievich&bdata=JmRiPW16aCZ0eXBIPTEmc2l0ZT1laG9zdC1saXZl>. One nonscholarly article was cited: "Confronting the Worst: Writers and Catastrophe," *PEN America: A Journal for Writers and Readers* 7 (2006): 90–100. However, the bibliography describes the article as a "roundtable discussion" that includes Alexievich, among other authors. Moreover, the publication's website (<http://www.pen.org/pen-america-journal>) describes it as a journal that "publishes fiction, poetry, conversation, criticism, and memoir." The issue here is scrutiny of an author's work in peer-reviewed scholarly journals.

6. Again, accessed October 13, 2015: <http://online.sagepub.com/site/misc/search.xhtml>. This is not to suggest that there has been no scholarship. One can find occasional book reviews, for example. But what is conspicuous for its absence is the lack of scholarship by the literature academy and the journalism academy (the latter along with the communication academy), this for a genre that is both literature and journalism.

7. In the text, I will continue to use the spelling “Alexievich” because this is the preferred spelling on her website. See <http://www.alexievich.info/indexEN.html>. Also, all of her later works use this spelling. But in citations of her works I use the spelling under which the work was originally published in English.

8. Svetlana Alexievich, *Zinky Boys*, trans. Julia and Robin Whitby (New York: Norton, 1992). Besides republication in Kevin Kerrane and Ben Yagoda’s *The Art of Fact: A Historical Anthology of Literary Journalism* (New York: Scribner, 1997), “Boys in Zinc” was also republished in *The Granta Book of Reportage* in 1993. The text cited here is the original 1990 *Granta* version.

9. S[vetlana] Alexievich, *War’s Unwomanly Face*, trans. Keith Hammond and Lyudmila Lezhneva (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1988).

10. Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl*, trans. Keith Gessen (Normal, OK: Dalkey Archive Press, 2005).

11. Alexiyevich, “Boys in Zinc,” 146.

12. *Ibid.*, 151.

13. *Ibid.*, 150.

14. Alexievich, *Zinky Boys*, 181.

15. Alexiyevich, “Boys in Zinc,” 146.

16. Joseph Brodsky, “On ‘September 1, 1939’ by W.H. Auden,” in *Less Than One: Selected Essays* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1986), 317.

17. Alexiyevich, “Boys in Zinc,” 146.

18. *Ibid.*, 152, 153.

19. *Ibid.*, 156–57.

20. *Ibid.*, 157.

21. *Ibid.*, 157–58.

22. S. Elizabeth Bird and Robert W. Dardenne, “Myth, Chronicle, and Story: Exploring the Narrative Qualities of News,” in *Media, Myths, and Narratives: Television and the Press*, ed. James W. Carey (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1988), 71.

23. Elizabeth A. Warner, “Russian Peasant Beliefs and Practices Concerning Death and the Supernatural Collected in Novosokol’niki Region, Pskov Province, Russia, 1995,” pt. 2, “Death in Natural Circumstances,” *Folklore* 111, no. 2 (2000): 259; *Handbook of Burial Rites* (Toronto: Mount Pleasant Group of Cemeteries, 1985), 19.

24. Warner, “Russian Peasant Beliefs,” 264; [Orthodoxinfo, orthodoxinfo.com/death/opencoffins.aspx](http://orthodoxinfo.com/death/opencoffins.aspx); also witnessed by the author on numerous occasions.

25. It might be worth noting that Dovnar’s kneeling before her husband is another curious detail that echoes an older tradition. It is one drawn from Russian wedding culture. In the tradition, which goes back to the nineteenth century, the bride demonstrates her obedience to her husband by getting down on her knees and prostrating herself at his feet. It recalls the passage in the Epistle to the Ephesians, traditionally recited at Russian Orthodox weddings, which admonishes “the wife see that she reverence her husband.” Of course, this can justifiably prompt protests from feminists. But again we detect the turning to an older mythos, that of Tamara’s great-grandmothers, in a challenge to Soviet secular myths. See Henry

Neville Hutchinson, *Marriage Customs in Many Lands* (London: Seeley, 1897), 199; www.english.pravda.ru/society/family/21-01-2007/90176-wedding_tradition-0/#; Ephesians 5:33 (King James version).

26. Alexievich, "Boys in Zinc," 151.

27. Alexievich, *Zinky Boys*, 2.

28. *Ibid.*, 1–10.

29. Karyakin was the first notable Soviet man of letters to call for the restoration of citizenship to Russian novelist and Nobel laureate Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who was exiled from the Soviet Union in 1974 and stripped of his citizenship.

30. Capote, *In Cold Blood*, 9.

31. Alexievich, "Boys in Zinc," 160–61.

32. Alexievich, *Zinky Boys*, 3–5.

33. Harkins, *Dictionary of Russian Literature*, 314, s.v. "Pushkin, Alexander Sergeyevich."

34. Alexievich, *Zinky Boys*, 6. In most translations "Valla" is translated as "Bela."

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.*, 7.

37. *Ibid.*, 10.

38. *Ibid.*, 8.

39. John Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn," in *The Complete Poetry and Selected Prose of John Keats*, ed. Harold Edgar Briggs (1819; repr., New York: Modern Library, 1915), 295.

40. Nicholas Berdyaev, *Dostoevsky*, trans. Donald Atwater (New York: New American Library, 1974), 9.

41. Alexievich, *Zinky Boys*, 8.

42. Matthew 24: 4–5.

43. Alexievich, *Zinky Boys*, 9.

44. Berdyaev, *Dostoevsky*, 188–212.

45. Hartsock, "Literary Reportage," 26–28, 34–42.

46. Laughlin, *Chinese Reportage*, 7.

47. Susan Greenberg, "Kapuściński and Beyond: The Polish School of Reportage," in *Global Literary Journalism: Exploring the Journalistic Imagination*, eds. Richard Lance Keeble and John Tulloch (New York: Peter Lang, 2012), 129. I find Greenberg's assessment especially useful because it goes beyond the contributions of Ryszard Kapuściński to the genre and provides insight into the more contemporary Polish experience, which has been little explored but which is indeed a rich tradition.

48. Sonja Merljak Zdovc, "Literary Journalism: The Intersection of Literature and Journalism," *Acta Neophilologica* 37, nos. 1–2 (2004): 17–22. See also Leonora Flis, *Factual Fictions: Narrative Truth and the Contemporary American Documentary Novel* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2010), 165.

49. Alexievich, "Boys in Zinc," 537.