



Home » Leisure

Svetlana Alexievich: A history of the soul

Nobel laureate Svetlana Alexievich on writing her 'Red Encyclopaedia', a new book on love, and what freedom means to her

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Nobel laureate Svetlana Alexievich. Photo: Reuters

Svetlana Alexievich has published five books in her lifetime, but each of them, she says, is a chapter from a single story, of people who lived a Soviet life. From the women who worked at the front during World War II to the young soldiers who

returned home from the Soviet-Afghan war in zinc coffins, from the Chernobyl nuclear disaster and the confusion and fury that followed the initial euphoria of perestroika, Alexievich spoke to hundreds of people to record an oral history of a collective nation that she was a part of. The Belarusian journalist received the Nobel prize for literature in 2015 “for her polyphonic writings, a monument to suffering and courage in our time”.

In an exclusive email interview, Alexievich talks of how, even though the “Red Empire” is no more, the “red human” survives. Edited excerpts:

You choose to be invisible in your books, telling us of a time or an event through other people’s voices. Why did you make this decision?

In my books, real people narrate the main events of their times—war, the disintegration of the socialist empire, Chernobyl—all of which taken together is the history that they leave behind in words, the country’s general history. Both old and new. Each is a history of one small, human destiny. All of history misses out on the history of the soul. Human passions are so often not included in history.

My task is to hold them back from the darkness of disappearance and, most importantly, not to think up anything but to listen and hear about how people thought at a particular time, in a concrete situation, that is, during my time, the time that I had witnessed.

I handle two kinds of falsehoods—the falsehood of totalitarianism and the falsehood of history as a science that sanitizes human life till it becomes a dispassionate extract in a history book. My wish is to humanize history.

On the one hand, I always wanted voices in my books to sound like a chorus, but on the other, I want that the lone human voice be heard. It seems to me that today one wants to hear the other, and not so much about eras, or of a time when everything was compressed into a kind of monolith. It is the canvas of a single soul that has always interested me; after all it is there that everything happens. It is through this smaller history that I see the larger history, and it is then no more a buzz about time, but rather something that we can understand, something that holds our interest about the years gone by. We are interested in human lives and so I diminish things to human measures. In order to understand the kind of times that we lived in, I give a voice to all. Each yells out his or her truth. I am a person with democratic views, but in order to give form to those times, I must hear out very different people.

I name the genre that I write in as “novel of voices”. I wrote the “Red

Encyclopaedia”, the history of an utopia for more than 30 years. A Communist utopia. *The Unwomanly Face Of War*, *The Last Witnesses*, *Zinky Boys*, *Chernobyl Prayer* are all chapters from it. *Second-Hand Time* is also a chapter. The very final one. I never take upon myself the right to judge and condemn. I strive only to understand.

Also read: [Second-Hand Time: A novel of voices](#)

Why did you decide that the collective memoir is the best way for you to tell the truth about a period of history that people from nations that made up the former Soviet Union are still trying to grasp?

Many of my acquaintances and friends are from there—from socialism. There are many idealists amongst them. As well as romantics. Today they are called differently—romantics of enslavement. The slaves of an utopia. I think that all of them could have lived a different life, but lived a Soviet one. Why? For long I searched for the answer to this question, travelling around this huge country which not so long ago was called the USSR, using thousands of tapes. That was socialism and that simply was our life. Bit by bit, little by little, I collected the history of “domestic”, “internal” socialism. The socialism as it lived in the human soul. I was attracted by this small canvas—that of the human being, of just one human life. Actually, that is where everything takes place.

Immediately after the war, (German philosopher) Theodor Adorno made the astonished comment: “To write poetry after Auschwitz is simply barbaric.” My teacher, Ales Adamovich, whom I wish to remember today with gratitude, also considered that to write prose about the horrors of the (20th) century was sacrilege. But we must not hesitate here. We must deliver facts as they are. Only the witness must talk. We may recall (Friedrich) Nietzsche and his words, that not a single artist can bear or survive reality. They are unable to elevate it.

I have always grappled with the fact that the truth cannot be packaged into one soul or one mind alone. It is something fragmented, there is so much to it, the truth is varied and scattered across the world. (Fyodor) Dostoevsky thought that humankind knows much much more about itself than it was able to roll into literature. So, what do I do? I gather together the feelings, ideas, words of everydayness. I put together the life of my times. I’m interested in the history of the soul, the being of the soul. All that the larger history usually misses out on, all that it is condescending towards. So I work on all the history that goes missing.



Newspapers with the 'Statement to the Soviet people' by the leaders of the August 1991 coup against Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev. Photo: AFP

Could you tell me about the method you follow when working towards a book? You say you speak to 500-600 people for each of them. How do you decide when it's time to stop; or what to include from the conversations and what to leave out?

My books are created from hundreds of details, numerous shades and nuances. It has happened that out of an entire day's conversation, only a single phrase was picked up. But what a phrase it was! "I went to the front so small, that after the war I became an adolescent."

Or I sit for 4 hours with a woman who during the war was a machine operator but narrates to me only newspaper clichés: "The war began...and we Soviet girls, together with the men, tore into the frontline. That's how the Motherland educated us...". And I just want to get out of that place, losing all hope that I can ever tear through the banality, the propaganda. And just when I'm already at the exit, and I put on (my overcoat), the woman requests me: "Do sit down. I'll tell you...You will never know how terrifying it is to die at dawn. The birds are singing, there is silence and a few minutes later there is an order: 'Fire!' And the grass is so green, the air so light, and we have to die."

And this is where literature begins... And further on, at the fag end of the

conversation, she recalls: “After the battle we walked around the field, searching for the living, in case someone happened to be alive. And they would be lying on trampled grass, all scattered, lying like potatoes, staring up at the sky—both the Germans and our soldiers. All of them young, nice. And we would be left feeling sorry for both.”

You see, I approach a person as a friend, and so what happens is not even remotely an interview, but a conversation about life, about everything there is: about a new blouse, and about love, and about suffering...ultimately about life. About what one understands, what one knows, what one sees. Our human lives are not made of big things. Even those which are big in our lives, are obtained from something small. As (Russian poet) Anna Akhmatova wrote, “If you only know from what dirt flowers grow, without any shame.” That’s how it is for me. Of course, it’s another thing that one had to have such a focus, or perspective. And this is what is important for me. Not collecting material, but collecting philosophy, which is to see that which is considered ordinary in a totally new light.

I take a long time to write my books, almost seven-eight years. I have recorded 500-700 people. I keep searching for a person overwhelmed by events, and not just some banal narrator. For one to respond in a new way, one has to be questioned in a new way. My interest lies not in the information but in the secret. The secret of life.

I question people long and hard. I seek a person who is not simply part of a biological flow, but one who reflects over life. One who is overwhelmed by simply being.



A nursery school in the ghost town of Pripyat, near the Chernobyl nuclear plant. Photo: AFP

Do you continue to remain in touch with any of the people you speak to? Since what you write is a history of the living, do you sometimes feel that you could continue to re-open your books? Or do you not look back on a book once completed and published?

Many of my heroes are no longer among the living. But there are some whom I continue to write to and we call each other.

I keep returning to my notes, and sometimes to my heroes, in order to sometimes ask about something, to understand something that has been left out. In 2012-13, I supplemented all of my books. I understood that I have left out something important, something that my internal censor had left out. For instance, the book *The Unwomanly Face Of War* was not published for two years, not till (Mikhail) Gorbachev came to power. I was tried for *The Zinky Boys*. *Chernobyl Prayer* has never been published in Belarus. It is no secret that there was censorship, some parts would be simply eliminated. I remember asking one of my heroines what she took with her to the front line. And she started laughing and said: “A suitcase full of toffees. I had received my last pay and bought a suitcase full of toffees.” And the censors struck this out, telling me, “Do you understand that these women defended the motherland, and you go on about some toffees.”

All my books have been banned in Belarus for more than 20 years. They are not

published. People bring them here from Moscow. But now under public pressure, *The Unwomanly Face Of War* has been included in the school curriculum in Belarus. Apparently, school students have to either buy or download the book from the Internet.

Reading your books, and the testimonies they contain, is not easy. Am I right in thinking that working on them is an even more emotionally draining process for you? How do you deal with it? Does it affect your relationship with your family in any way?

My friend is a children's surgeon and oncologist. What does she experience when each day she has to tell mothers the devastating truth about their children? Is it easy for her? Yes, our work does have an element of risk in it. But that is true for many. This is my profession, my work. And I fulfil it. I strive to do it with honesty.

Russian culture has the unique experience of carrying out a naive and terrifying human experiment to create heaven on earth, which has ended with the construction of a gigantic fraternal grave.

- Svetlana Alexievich

What are your most abiding memories about perestroika, and the end of a way of life as you knew it?

During the time of perestroika, freedom was thought of as a kind of festival, (people) walked along the streets and squares, chanting: "Freedom! Freedom!", but they had no idea what freedom actually was. I asked my heroes: "How did you imagine freedom to be in the 1990s?"—"We thought that we would be having the same kind of shops as there are in the West. They would be full of things." No one thought of freedom as some kind of work. When they understood this, they were lost. Both intellectuals and politicians. They had no understanding that freedom needs free people, which we were not. We did not allow the world to us, we locked it out. Now we are frightening others, that Russians are good soldiers, do not bargain, as our lives are cheap. We know only one way of making others respect us—by scaring them.

(Vladimir) Putin came and the world became frightened of us. How has Putin been able to resurrect the Stalinist machine so quickly? Once again, the FSB (Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation, the former KGB) can force their way into

any home, confiscate computers, convict bloggers for posts supportive of the Ukraine; throughout the country they are on a witch-hunt to prosecute students, teachers, military personnel as alleged spies. People are scared and no one knows what is really happening in society, and what its thoughts are.

I will be so bold as to say that we missed the chance that we had in the 1990s. As to the question of whether the country should be strong or worthy, where people live well, the first is preferred—that the country should be strong. Now once again it is the era of force. Russians are fighting with the Ukrainians, with their brethren. My father is a Belarusian, my mother is Ukrainian. And there are many like me. Russian aircraft are bombing Syria...

When I wrote *Second-Hand Time*, I thought that we had survived a “red era” with curses and tears, but after 25 years—can we watch all this quietly? As if it’s just a historical experience



Russian President Vladimir Putin looking at Soviet World War II posters at the State Museum of the Great Patriotic War in Minsk, Belarus. Photo: AFP

This is important, because debates about socialism have not died down till now. A new generation has grown up, and it has a different map of the world. But many young people are once again reading (Karl) Marx and (Vladimir) Lenin. Russian towns are inaugurating museums to (Joseph) Stalin, building memorials to him. While there is now no “Red Empire”, the “red human” survives, continues. The time

of hope has been replaced by the time of fear. Time has once again turned around...second-hand time...

But I'm no longer confident that I have completed the history of the "red human"...

You are currently working on a couple of books, on love and on ageing. Can you tell me specifically what aspect of these two subjects got you to start working on them? And how are the books coming along?

I have for some years now been collecting material for my book *The Wonderful Deer Of The Eternal Hunt*—that is 100 male and female confessions about love. I want to emancipate my hero from the big ideas. And to discuss with him things that life is built on. And there are only two of them: love and death.

But it turned out to be very difficult to talk of them. People are unable to talk about them. In one interview, I said I wanted to talk to people about these two things, and will be happy to receive letters (about them). Subsequently, I received a lot of history. But all of this was about how people fought it out, established themselves and exhausted themselves at work.



Belarusian military cadets with photos of soldiers who died during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Photo: Viktor Drachev/AFP

The Chukchis, for instance, have hundreds of words to signify all of what we have

rolled into just a single word called “snow”. They have different words for wet snow and for the dry one, for evening snow and the early morning one. Similarly, the French have a wide vocabulary for the word “love”. But we do not have the empiricism of happiness, throughout history we have either been fighting or preparing for war. We are subsumed by our history. I have asked almost a hundred people. And there is almost no one happy amongst them. It is remarkably inclusive and an inability to value happiness. Though people talk about themselves more uninhibitedly now.

Earlier, if you consider our classics and Soviet literature, it seemed that the biological human did not exist: They did not include anyone with all his/her human needs. Why do Russians read Western literature? Because they discuss the human body, the mysteries of the human body, they discuss love—both beautiful and savage. We have none of it in our literature!

And now people are more open, but not free. I have not met any free people. Each one is in some way or the other still tied to the Soviet times, and in some degree or the other nailed/chained to that experience. In my new book on love, I search just for this new canvas of feelings, of this new canvas of vocabulary.

Each of your books contains stories of love as well. But these stories of love are also those of loss, suffering and pain. Is this what got you interested in the subject? Does it seem to you that suffering, loss, the feeling of being betrayed, pain—all of which inhabit your books—seems to lay a human being bare like nothing else?

Whether in war or in a concentration camp, a human very easily transforms into an animal. I investigate this human trajectory: upwards to the heavens and downwards to the beasts. But in the narratives on love, especially now, when people are heeding their feelings more, I know and preserve that animal in the human, and what is cited by the body is very interesting and turns out once again to be that mysterious space which has scarcely been mastered by our culture. Our culture is a lofty one, preoccupied only with the soul, but the animal in us which we despised, oppressed and preserved within us, suddenly emerged from the underground and began crawling (towards us)—both terrifying and beautiful! And we have come to know many unexpected things about ourselves. That which is both petty and lofty. Is it possible to write about love without involving and respecting the dark, beastly essence of our nature? We, each of us, have our own secrets.

From all that which has happened to us and to all, I would also add both hatred, as well as love. I am one of those who would like to add love, because hatred does not

salvage us.

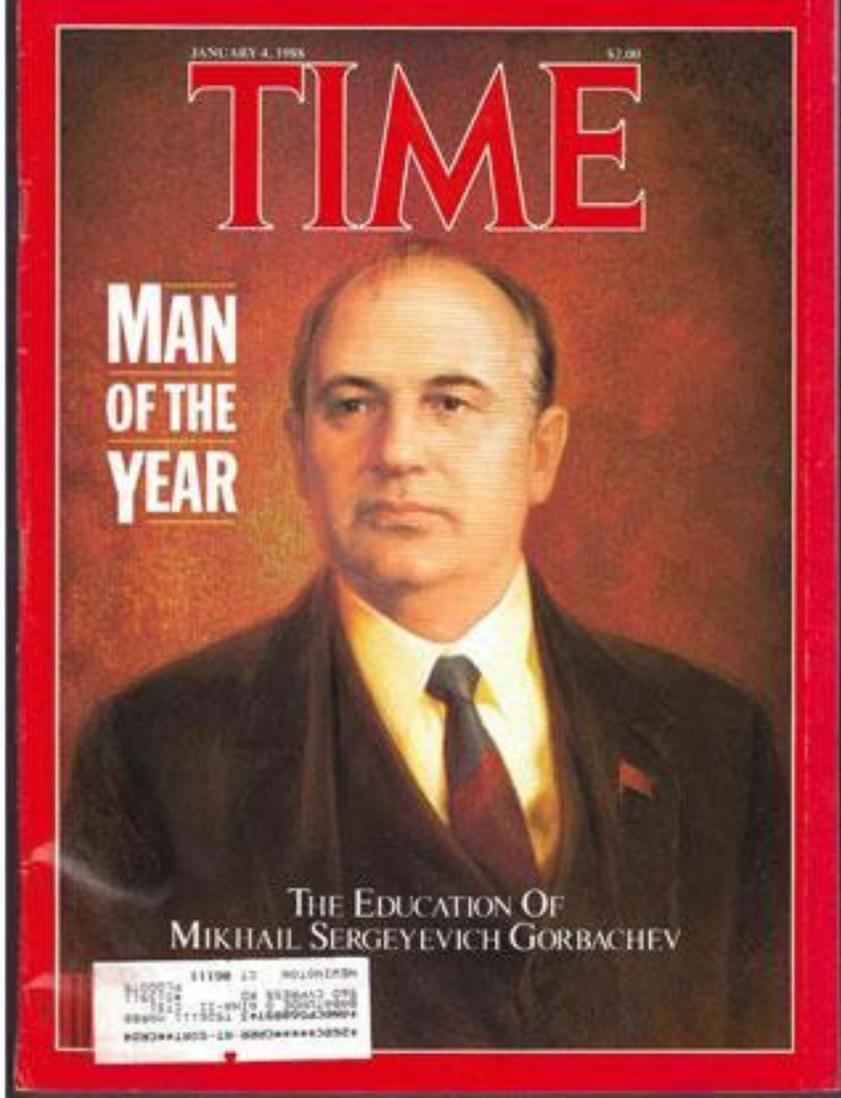
You write of freedom. What does this mean to you?

I have written five books, but actually all my life I have been writing just one book—the encyclopaedia of the “Red Person”, of the “Red Utopia”—of that life which was called socialism. Russian culture has the unique experience of carrying out a naive and terrifying human experiment to create heaven on earth, which has ended with the construction of a gigantic fraternal grave. I thought it was important to do this work, because the “red utopia” will continue for long to seduce one. What was the objective of all our sufferings? I keep asking myself this. And when I put forth this question to my heroes, it takes them by surprise. For many the suffering was valuable in itself. Their main task. But it turns out that suffering does not convert itself into freedom.

Freedom is a difficult task which has to be tackled day-to-day. We still do not have this culture. Gorbachev and a handful of intelligentsia made the resolution of the 1990s. Ninety per cent of the people woke up in a country that was unfamiliar for them and did not know how to live further. They still do not know how to live in this country, and are unable to accept capitalism. I often hear what they miss about socialism. People did not have to struggle with three different jobs. All lived similar lives. Life was spent on life itself—at the bonfire, at the guitar, on conversations, on reading books. All this is very difficult to do now. In general, capitalism, even if it is not the ruthless kind that exists in Russia today, is a very difficult system. Yes, you may be able to possess something, but you have to work very hard. For us it is the ultimate reordering of life. It is psychological. Few are prepared for this. On a trip to someplace near Vladimir, I saw a queue of such men at a shop in the morning.

What freedom, what papers, meetings in Moscow...why, they had nothing to do! But as soon as the shop opens, they will have freedom. There will be five different types of vodka, bananas, all that one can wish for! I asked, can this really be freedom for a human being? They replied, that it was enough for them. Only a farmer is a fascist for them. And why is he a fascist? Because (with him) you cannot steal and you have to work. And all these men—there were four of them—worked on his farm and left.

So who is going to build freedom? On what and on whom will it stand? Freedom cannot be brought like Swiss chocolates or Dutch cheese. It requires time, it has to be lived, it has to be brought to the masses to be experienced.



A 'TIME' magazine cover featuring the last president of the Soviet Union.

What has winning the Nobel Prize meant to you? What has been the reaction like in Russia and Belarus, where you and others have been persecuted, and whose governments you have openly and consistently spoken out against? In what way, if at all, has it changed your life?

When I was declared a Nobel laureate, Belarusians came out on the streets of Minsk, kissing and hugging each other. But the dictator (Alexander) Lukashenko was unable to find any positive words for me, he said that I was “pouring dirt on the country”. That was what Stalin in his time had also said about (Ivan) Bunin and (Boris) Pasternak, that was what (Leonid) Brezhnev had said about (Joseph) Brodsky, who was also a Russian Nobel laureate. But even after 50 years nothing changes for dictators, including their lexicon.

And if the president of Russia himself says, “Whoever is not with us is a national traitor,”, then you can imagine what the environment in the country is like. Young people who participate in demonstrations and protests receive sentences of 8-10 years in camps. Any author who criticizes the regime becomes the “people’s enemy”.

My life, after I won the Nobel prize, has become an unending saga of travels to different countries and continents. I, therefore, dream about returning to my writing table, to the unfinished book about love.

I like, and increasingly so, simply life itself. To open the windows in the mornings to the gardens, out beyond the city...to light a candle...to sit on the grass. The longer you live, the more enigmatic life becomes. That is why my writing too has slowed down. Handling words has become less easy. I wish for greater accuracy, yet life's nuances keep on increasing.

Svetlana Alexievich's responses have been translated from the Russian by Aditi Bhaduri, a journalist and researcher who specializes in foreign policy, international affairs and gender.

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[CHERNOBYL NUCLEAR DISASTER](#)

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