Examine the construction and function of Svetlana Alexievich's narrative in The Unwomanly Face of War.

The Unwomanly Face of War by Nobel laureate Svetlana Alexievich has been described as 'a disruptive, yet unpretentious, anti-war book', and is a text which focuses on the testimonies of female soldiers who fought in the Soviet army during the Great Patriotic War.[1] As the description suggests, Alexievich does not attempt to glorify the conflict but rather seeks to illuminate the hardships and sufferings faced by many female combatants in the Red Army. Furthermore, Alexievich's narrative approaches the Great Patriotic War from a more emotional perspective, a value which she argues the male-oriented Soviet narrative neglects in favour of patriotism and victory. Presented as a counternarrative, Alexievich suggests that this emotional perspective of the war is better communicated by women and expresses her own ideas regarding warfare and femininity throughout the text. The author's introductory chapter 'A Human Being is Greater Than War' is of considerable significance to this essay, with the information regarding not only her reasons for composing the book but also explaining the interview processes and censorship of the text, all of which demonstrates how the official war narrative has suppressed the feminine counternarrative. However, this is not the only instance wherein Alexievich's narrative can be recognised, as the organisation and editing of the sources demonstrate Alexievich's personal interpretation of the accounts, allowing her to present her ideas and therefore narrative in a more discreet way.

Alexievich's Introduction:

As primary sources, oral histories function much like memoirs, being that they are narratives constructed retrospectively, with sociologist Dr Patricia Leavy stating that 'oral history allows people to openly narrate their stories, participants are given space to reflect, reconstruct and build meaning out of their past experiences'.[2] It is important for any scholar conducting oral history research to ensure that their interviews reflect this and that their subjective input remains minimal; although it should be accepted that absolute neutrality is practically impossible, researchers should allow the narratives to be constructed as independently as possible. In the introduction to *The Unwomanly Face of War,* Alexievich remarks that due to censorship and the uncompromising official narrative of the Great Patriotic War, Soviet female combatants struggled to articulate their war experience. It is for this reason that Alexievich places such emphasis on the conditions of her interviews, assuring readers of the respect and compassion she extended to these women. While she does not offer a detailed methodology for her

[1] Kimberly A. Redding, Review: 'The Unwomanly Face of War: An Oral History of Women in World War II', *The Oral History Review,* 47/1, (2020), p. 171.
[2] Patricia Leavy, *Oral History,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 23.

qualitative research, Alexievich does describe the general circumstances of these scenarios in literary form. After detailing the familial, feminine activities in which she would often partake with these women, such as discussing hairstyles and recipes, Alexievich states 'I sit for a long time, sometimes a whole day [...] after a certain time, you never know when or why, suddenly comes this long-awaited moment, when the person departs from the canon', indicating that given the right circumstances, many of her interviewees were not only willing but eager to tell their stories.[3] Furthermore, Alexievich's condemnation of the official narrative extends into her revelations regarding post-interview communications, stating that 'Several times women sent back my transcribed text with a postscript: "no need for small details...write about our great victory..."'; while this information does not directly alter the content of the women's accounts, it does impact the readers' interpretations of them.[4] It reinforces Alexievich's argument that *The Unwomanly Face of War* is a counternarrative, and the accounts within have been, and continue to be suppressed by the State's official narrative of the war. In addition to this, this kind of response also credits Alexievich's interviewing techniques, as it was only after the interview had taken place when they returned to their daily lives in the late-soviet period that these women once again began to fear deviating from the canon.

Regarding the Soviet state's dismissal of all accounts of the Great Patriotic War that did not conform to the official narrative, it is evident that Alexievich believes gender played a fundamental part in determining whose experiences would be included in this narrative. Throughout the introductory chapter, Alexievich repeatedly argues that the official narrative of the war in the Soviet Union was ultimately the male narrative and that the female narrative had been largely silenced. Yekelchyk remarks that the rejection of female soldiers in Soviet society was 'The greatest "revelation" of Alexievich's book when it was first published', indicating that it was not their unique experiences, but their silenced voices that astonished readers.[5] The idea that the history of the Great Patriotic War was being told exclusively as a "man's war" can be seen not only in Alexievich's writings, where she states things such as 'We are all captives of "men's" notions and "men's" sense of war. "Men's" words.', but also in the anecdotes she includes in her introduction.[6] One such anecdote reveals that a woman being interviewed had been given strict instructions by her husband to tell the "correct" story of the war, which included studying a Soviet history book on the topic, suggesting that not only did

[3] Svetlana Alexievich, *The Unwomanly Face of War*, tr. by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, (London: Penguin Classics, 2017), p. xv.
[4] Ibid., p. xxiii.
[5] Serhy Yekelchyk, 'People's War, States Memory?', *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 61/4, (2019), p. 442.
[6] S. Alexievich, *The Unwomanly Face of War,* p. xiii.

societal pressure dissuade women from telling their stories, but also the men in their personal lives.[7] Alexievich sees the "male" narrative of the war as one made up of statistics, strategy, and victory, making it indistinguishable from the official narrative, and essentially devoid of any emotion. This generalised view of the male narrative is undoubtedly cynical, and reduces male soldiers to unfeeling militarists, with Alexievich going so far as to suggest that men are naturally predisposed to killing, being 'prepared from childhood for the fact that they may have to shoot'.[8] Furthermore, Alexievich's narrative acts as a counternarrative, in this case meaning a female narrative, of the Great Patriotic War, focusing primarily on the emotional, humanistic aspects of the women's experiences. Although *The Unwomanly Face of War* undoubtedly gave a long-awaited voice to the female combatants, it can also be argued that by constructing her narrative in this way, and by so heavily associating the official narrative with the male narrative, Alexievich marginalises the emotional narratives of male combatants.

The introductory chapter to *The Unwomanly Face of War* concludes with a discussion of the censorship of the book, which further verifies the concept that Alexievich's work is a counternarrative. First published in 1985, *The Unwomanly Face of War* was the product of many years of research conducted during the denouement of Brezhnev's regime, an era retrospectively known as the Era of Stagnation. On the eve of Perestroika, this period saw increasing dissent towards the regime, with many ordinary Soviet citizens beginning to acknowledge the flaws of the Soviet State and becoming eager to discuss their pasts and experiences within it. Alexievich's book reflects this, however, her discussion of censorship indicates that the *Glasnost* ideology had not yet begun, with Nina Tumarkin suggesting that 'Only towards the end of the 1980s, after the country had long been convulsed by the tumult of truths about the reality of high Stalinism, did […] the Great Patriotic War come under scrutiny'.[9] In the section titled 'From What the Censors Threw Out', accounts include the discussion of topics such as menstruation, rape, cowardice, and cannibalism, all of which had been silenced since the end of the war.[10] Furthermore, this section of Alexievich's book also includes conversations with the censors, 'obviously fictionalised, but authentic-sounding', which demonstrate both the chauvinism and dismissiveness of the state censors, who supposedly stated things such as 'You humiliate women' and 'You don't love our heroes'.[11] This part of the text also supports Alexievich's narrative concerning the gender biases between the official and unofficial narratives, as in the case where the censor states ' You make them into

[7] S. Alexievich, *The Unwomanly Face of War*, p. xxii.
[8] Ibid., p. xxi.
[9] Nina Tumarkin, 'The Great Patriotic War as Myth and Memory', *European Review*, 1/4, (2003), p. 605.
[10] S. Alexievich, *The Unwomanly Face of War,* p. xxix-xxxv.
[11] Ibid., p. xxxi, xxxv.

ordinary women, females. But our women are saints', suggesting that Soviet officials would defend the saintliness of their women, but neglect their biological, gender-based sufferings.[12] Furthermore, by including this discussion of censorship in her work, Alexievich emphasises that these women's experiences in the war had been stifled by the state, simultaneously suggesting that each account has something of great significance to say, a suggestion which is true in almost all instances.

Structure and Editing of the Sources:

It is not only through the introductory chapter to *The Unwomanly Face of War* that Alexievich's narrative can be recognised, as it can also be seen more subtly in the accounts themselves, or more specifically in the structure and editing of them. Alexievich presents her work as a primary source, however the question of authenticity within the book has become relatively controversial, with some arguing that Alexievich gives a voice to the silenced, and others suggesting that her input tampers with the integrity of the witness's statements, both of which Helga Lenart-Cheng suggests are oversimplifications.[13] It can be said that Alexievich's input towards and editing of the interviews, while subtle, is still recognisable, with a more obvious example of this being in her consistent use of ellipses throughout the text. This literary technique can be found both in Alexievich's writing and in the accounts themselves, most commonly being used in the latter to indicate a pause, the reason for which Lenart-Cheng suggests can be a result of either; the official narrative being so neatly formulated that 'there are no gaps into which people could insert their own messy stories'; or demonstrating 'The inadequacy of language to express and the failure of reason to comprehend trauma'.[14] While these reasonings are entirely valid, there is an alternative which requires consideration, that being the use of an ellipsis to punctuate the end of an account, added in during the editing process. The majority of the accounts in this text conclude with an ellipsis, invoking the sense that the narrator is audibly trailing-off, making the text itself appear more immediate, and read like a primary source, and not a collection of interviews that have been trimmed down and edited by Alexievich. This is not to suggest that such editing invalidates what is written in the accounts because, as Brintlinger states, writers like Alexievich 'must still be read as authors who, through selection, juxtaposition, and commentary, present the evidence they have gathered in literary form'.[15] The narrative being constructed here by Alexievich is that these sources, as

[12] S. Alexievich, *The Unwomanly Face of War*, p. xxxi.
[13] Helga Lenart-Cheng, 'Personal and Collective Memories in the Works of Svetlana Alexievich', *History and Memory*, 32/2, (2020), p. 87.
[14] Ibid., p. 84-85.
[15] Angela Brintlinger, 'Mother's, Father(s), Daughter: Svetlana Aleksievich and the Unwomanly Face of War', *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 59/3-4, (2017), p. 199.

opposed to those recited in the official war narratives, are pure, unaltered, accounts of the war from the female perspective, and she attempts to solidify this sense of authenticity through her editing of the text.

Another crucial way in which Alexievich constructs her narrative is through her thematic organisation of the accounts themselves. Rather than using an alternative structuring system, such as alphabetically by name, or a rough chronology, Alexievich instead assembles the texts into categories based on common themes she recognises between them. By "cherry-picking" her titles in this way, Alexievich is essentially presenting the source based on themes and commonalities *she* recognises as important, therefore conveying 'her own understanding of women's experience, at times contradicting the evidence of her interlocutors'.[16] As suggested earlier in this essay, Alexievich has a controversial interpretation of the different ways in which men and women experience war, suggesting that warfare is in a man's nature, whereas for women she suggests 'how much more unbearable and unthinkable it is to kill, because a woman gives life'.[17] This gendered way of thinking has led to critics such as Roland Brown recognising Alexievich's narrative as being built upon maternal or feminine feelings, which can be recognised in many of the chapter titles in her book.[18] An example of how this narrative is constructed can be found in the chapter title "We Didn't Shoot…"; despite being a section dedicated to the women who worked on the 'second front' as laundresses, cooks, and other non-combat roles, it can be argued that the title does not accurately convey this.[19] The phrasing of the title suggests a reluctancy in these women to have been involved in direct combat, as if they had to opportunity to shoot and yet couldn't, with the ellipsis indicating an almost regretful reflection on this choice; in actuality, these women had not been enlisted as combat soldiers, and therefore there was little expectation to shoot a weapon. Yekelchyk has argued that Alexievich exhibits a certain comfortability with the gender expectations of the early-mid 20th Century, which is reflected in this association of domestic combat roles with femininity and compassion.[20] Beyond this example, there are also entire sections dedicated to wanting beauty, wanting romance, on the women's experiences with children or families, all of which demonstrate how Alexievich presents these female soldiers as first and foremost being biologically female, with traditionally feminine ideas. Furthermore, it is important to recognise this aspect of the text as Alexievich's own narrative concerning war and gender; it can be assumed that the

[16] Brintlinger, 'Mother's, Father(s), Daughter', p. 202.
[17] Alexievich, *The Unwomanly Face of War,* p. xxi.
[18] Roland Elliott Brown, Review: ''The Unwomanly Face of War' by Svetlana Alexievich', *The Spectator,* (05/08/2017), p. 1.
[19] Alexievich, *The Unwomanly Face of War,* p. 159.
[20] Yekelchyk, 'People's War, States Memory?', p. 441.

women who constructed these accounts did not reflect on their experiences in the war in such an exclusively gendered way.

As we have seen, throughout *The Unwomanly Face of War* Alexievich repeatedly attempts to establish her work as a counternarrative; not only do her sources describe the events of the war through previously unheard perspectives, but Alexievich also uses the introduction to passionately condemn the male-oriented narratives of war. This being said, it can be argued that throughout the book there are numerous instances in which Alexievich herself conforms to some aspects of the official Soviet narrative of the Great Patriotic War. A primary example of this can be found in her observations about the Soviet people, particularly regarding unity and collectivism. In her introduction, Alexievich states 'But I love them. I admire them. They had Stalin and the Gulag, but they also had the Victory', which, although praising the feelings of patriotism and unity felt by the Soviet people, is still a striking observation considering her protests about the official war narrative and its focus on the victory rather than the war.[21] Furthermore, as Yekelchyk points out, Alexievich 'famously continues even today to speak positively of the Soviet people as a single political community' and this sense of admiration for their unity can also be seen in her presentation of relations between the male and female combatants.[22] Throughout the accounts, Alexievich includes many instances wherein male soldiers expressed their disdain for the women attempting to join the red army, almost all of which conclude with the women eventually being embraced and admired by their male counterparts, or at the very least begrudgingly accepted. The book does not explicitly go beyond these types of encounters, avoiding discussion of any ongoing physical, verbal, or sexual abuses that the female combatants faced. Ultimately, Alexievich cannot be wholly blamed for these limitations within her text, as these accounts are of course not simply historical sources, but fragmented stories of people's pasts, in which they undoubtedly experienced considerable trauma. However, evidence provided through both scholarly analysis and the book itself suggests that Alexievich's work does not entirely deviate from the official narrative of the Great Patriotic War, despite her efforts to construct a strong counternarrative.

Svetlana Alexievich's narrative in *The Unwomanly Face of War* cannot be reduced to an endorsement of anti-war sentiments; it also functions to dismantle the male-oriented official narrative of the Great Patriotic War in favour of the emotional, unheard, feminine narrative. As demonstrated throughout this essay, this narrative is predominantly made up of Alexievich's own interpretations concerning femininity and masculinity, which she incorporates into both her introduction and the accounts themselves. As Brintlinger

[21] Alexievich, *The Unwomanly Face of War,* p. xxiv.
[22] Yekelchyk, 'People's War, States Memory?', p. 440.

suggests, 'in this genre of documentary prose, the storyteller, the interviewer, the narrator's voice and persona are as important as those of the witnesses', indicating how significant Alexievich's narrative is to the reader's interpretation of the text.[23] By focusing on how the testimonies of the female soldiers had been silenced, and structuring these testimonies in a way that emphasised their inherently human, or more specifically feminine, nature, Alexievich was able to construct a narrative that could counter the "History of the Victory" that had dominated Soviet culture. Nevertheless, Alexievich's documentary prose does in several ways still conform to aspects of the official narrative, particularly in regard to gender roles and the Soviet values of patriotism and collectivism, all of which are emphasised throughout this text. Furthermore, *The Unwomanly Face of War* enables Alexievich to demonstrate the uniquely human experiences of the Great Patriotic War, inviting readers to consider the ways in which society has influenced their interpretations of the conflict, and how viewing it from an individual, human perspective can generate a greater understanding of it.

Word Count: 2966

[23] Brintlinger, 'Mother's, Father(s), Daughter', p. 202.

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