Polyphonic Memory and Narratives of Resilience in Svetlana Alexievich's Secondhand Time

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Introduction

> "For her polyphonic writings, a monument to suffering and courage in our time" (Swedish Academy on Alexievich's Nobel Award, 2015).

Svetlana Alexievich was the first Belarussian and the fifth representative of Russophone literature to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2015. Alexievich's case has been one of the most debated Nobel awards, due to the, seemingly, 'journalistic' nature of her work (Lindbladh 287). At the same time, critics have praised her for the ethical side of her literature describing it as the moral memory of the Soviet Union (Lashuk; Karpusheva 275; Marchesini 315), which covers the historical period from the Second World War to the post-Soviet era. Nevertheless, Alexievich does not address the political or cultural legacy

of the Soviet Union, but instead, the personal stories of people who lived through major political and historical events.

In this paper, I examine the narrative construction of resilience and non-resilience in Svetlana Alexievich's latest novel, *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets* (2013; trans. to English 2016). Focusing on the transition from communism to capitalism and the survival of the Soviet heritage, the author aspires to create a choral mnemonic mosaic about the historical collective traumas and peoples' adaptation (or not) to it. To this end, she adapts the traditions of Adamovich's collective novel and Dostoyevsky's polyphonic novel to her needs using life narratives, confessions and testimonies as her primary material. Reviewing literature on the fragmented nature of the Soviet and post-Soviet collective memory, I aim to explore the ethical side of her work that looks at struggle and tragedy with compassion and without any didactic tone. I hereby argue that resilience for Alexievich does not represent one particular coping strategy against adversities, but an empathetic and all-embracing stance towards the full spectrum of human adaptability.

Secondhand Time: The Novel

Svetlana Alexievich's biggest project on the Soviet and post-Soviet times until now has been the polyphonic novel *Secondhand Time*, a choral mosaic about the collapse of the United Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR) and the creation of a new world. In this book, Alexievich 'capitalizes' on her literary experience from her previous work and addresses the socialist cultural experience at large through testimonies and interviews, held as early as 1991 until late in 2012, with thousands of ex-citizens of the former USSR who entrusted her with their memories from Glasnost (the thawing of the relationships with the West), Perestroika (Reconstruction) and the capitalist era. Alexievich writes in the book's introduction called *Remarks from an accomplice*: "We're paying our respects to the Soviet era. Cutting ties with our old life. I'm trying to honestly hear out all the participants of the socialist drama" ('Secondhand' 13). The novel has a clear structure consisting of two parts with each one having separate subsections based on their theme and topic: the first part covers the period of 1991 to 2001, including testimonies collected at that time, and focuses on the abrupt, 'apocalyptic'

transition from communism to capitalism, but also reminiscences of the Soviet Union; in the second part the author groups the interviews from 2002 to 2012 examining the multi-level 'emptiness' of the new era. In both parts, although the interviewees are the narrators telling their own or someone else's story, the author declares her presence through introductions, comments or descriptions of her reactions to the testimonies. With this 'mosaic' or 'collage' technique, Alexievich manages to articulate her musings, while she reveals her distinctive literary voice.

By collecting testimonies and personal stories, Alexievich shows a particular interest in memory: "Human memory interests me not at the level of information, but as one of the human mysteries" ("Life"). The author defines memory as a human mystery, not to support a metaphysical approach to mnemonics or personal experience, but instead to approach memory as an imperfect historical source. The nuances of memory force her to question the reasons behind the remembrance or non-remembrance of an event and to look for multiple informants in order to reflect more efficiently on the post-Soviet collective memory. For this reason, Alexievich provides a selection of different stances and approaches to the same events through the various testimonies of her collection; a decision that manages to represent the polyphony of collective memory. The author offers the readers a choral piece varying from screams for help to self-assured testimonies of full adaptation and from endless mourning to calm recollections of the past. As it will be shown with the analysis of the narratives, the personal experiences of the interviewees cover the full spectrum of resilience and non-resilience stances to trauma and tragedy.

From the Polyphonic Novel to the Polyphonic Memory

The Nobel Prize brought significant attention to Svetlana Alexievich's work, which was previously understudied by literary scholars (Coleman 193). What caught the attention of the Nobel Prize committee was her polyphonic writing, which is strongly connected to Alexievich's literary vision (Lindbladh 282). Alexievich's aim is to create a "history of the Russian-Soviet soul" through the personal accounts of hardships and trauma resulting from the main historic events of the 20th century. In her

opinion, the personal accounts and stories that were unheard or suppressed constitute a 'missing history', an alternative historiography to the official one that includes events such as the Chernobyl accident and the Soviet-Afghan War (Lashuk). For that reason, she committed herself to give the stage to the hundreds of voices around her, against the hegemony of the Soviet and Russian official discourse and the master narratives (Lyotard 11).

Alexievich's vision can be better understood if we zero in on the Belarusian literary tradition. Alexievich mentions on her website the importance that Ales Adamovich's work played in the formation of her own writing. Subsuming to what he called courageous and sincere 'sverkhliteratura' [hyperliterature] (Bykov), Adamovich created a multivocal genre with multiple narrators; the 'collective novel', 'novel-oratorio', 'novel-evidence', 'people talking about themselves' (Alexievich, 'Chronicler'). The unprecedented tragedies of the previous century couldn't be captured by fiction, nor could fictional characters replace the stories of the victims who endured, suffered and managed to survive the catastrophes. Sverkhliteratura is not characterized as such due to its superiority, but for its humble mission to bring to light the multiple, unaltered truths and traumas of ordinary people. Polyphony shows respect to the victims, and thanks to its choral character it allows the reader to experience the stories in multiple levels. At the same time, the genre underlines the ethical side of literature and its capacity to overcome the limitations posed by other genres like the memoir and the historical novel. The tragic chorus of narrators under sverkhliteratura does not sing the extraordinary story of one person or some fictional characters, but the personal story of each narrator transforming trauma into a multisensory collective experience; seen, felt and heard. It is important to note that polyphony first appears in Russian literature in Dostoyevsky's masterpieces.

For Bakhtin "Dostoevsky is the creator of the polyphonic novel" (Bakhtin 6), a totally new genre of novels that captures "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses" (Bakhtin 6). Bakhtin developed the notion of 'polyphony' to articulate a writing technique according to which real-life situations are best depicted when the characters express different and contradicting positions or ideals.

That happens to the extent that they seem to act free from the writer's discursive authority. Polyphony might create the illusion that the author is absent when they are still omnipresent and omnipotent. Most importantly, according to Bakhtin, Dostoyevsky made a breakthrough destroying the tradition of the "monologic (homophonic) European novel" (8) and replacing it with a polyphonic literary world that corresponds to the scope and depth of his poetics.

Alexievich clearly influenced by both traditions, formed her own documentary prose, 'epic-choral prose', or as she calls it, 'novels in voices': "This is how I hear and see the world - as a chorus of individual voices and a collage of everyday details" ('Chronicler'). Her material though, is not fictional, but consists of real life-stories of people who survived a tragic historical event or eye witnesses. Capturing the memory and extracting the personal truth, the essence of the experience, is very demanding and Alexievich has to meet several times with some of her interviewees before she considers a narrative complete. She chooses between 10 and 20 to construct the centre or the core of the book (Lindbladh 285). Having built the narrative structure, Alexievich studies the transcriptions and rewrites them in a synthetic way: on the one hand, the interviews are 'narrativized' to recreate the feeling of the testimony to the author, while on the other, they are restructured in a way that fits a choral mosaic of memories. In Alexievich's case, the polyphonic novel turns to a form of resistance towards the repression of the Soviet and post-Soviet fragmented collective memory, as articulated by the 'monologic' official political discourse. The polyphonic novel brings to light not only the traumas and the personal reflections of the interviewees, but also the various resilient stances that the population had to take to overcome adversities.

Soviet and Post-Soviet Collective Memory

Collective memory is a notion first coined by Halbwachs in 1925 to describe the remembering patterns of a particular community or society as they are affected and forged by their norms and particular characteristics (Halbwachs 97). Since then, the concept has been widely employed and developed by social and political scholars and historians. Coming from cultural studies, Jan Assman proposed a

reconceptualization of collective memory by expanding Halbwachs initial concept in order to include not only the social but also the cultural sphere. In his opinion, we should distinguish the two dimensions of collective memory: the social aspect is called "communicative memory", while the cultural aspect is called "cultural memory" (110).

Communicative memory refers to collective memory that is socially mediated and transmitted through everyday communication. This type of remembrance is often found in oral history and life narratives representing the shared memories of a certain community, in a particular historic period (Assman 111). In this account, communicative memory is regarded as 'non-institutional' and as limited, in terms of temporal duration, surviving up to eighty years or just a few generations. At the same time, cultural memory is a type of collective memory connected to cultural identity, traditions and cultural symbols. As Assman states, it is institutional, "exteriorized, objectified, and stored away in symbolic forms" but also exists "in disembodied form" passing, in both forms, from generation to generation as reference points (111).

Contemporary scholarship studying the legacy of the Soviet Union and the role of its remembrance in the construction of national identities, views the case of the Soviet and post-Soviet collective memory as quite problematic. The reason for this is that post-Soviet and post-socialist remembrance is based on a contradiction: on the one hand "the past is as alive as the present […] glorified, mourned and condemned" (Rutten and Zvereva 23), while on the other, historical events and figures constitute "blank spots" (Wertsch 58) forgotten, ignored or silenced. As it is understood by the characterization 'post-Soviet', Russia lacks a new self-description (Etkind, 'Post-Soviet Russia' 153). Haunted by the Soviet past, its achievements and atrocities, the new state gives the impression that instead of moving forward it persistently looks back and, for some, it also moves backwards (Uffelmann 103). This direction has been given by the country's official discourse and the politics of history and memory that leave no place for critical reflection, acceptance and accountability. State power is legitimized by constructing its mission and identity (Rutten and Zvereva 20) based on the glorification of the victorious past (i.e. WWII and Stalin) or on its demonization (the case of the Baltic countries).

A very interesting analysis of the post-Soviet Russian collective memory comes from Etkind who explores what he describes as "post-Soviet political melancholia" ('Mourning' 57). In contrast to Assman's approach, Etkind regards cultural memory as an ever-changing phenomenon that can acquire three different stances towards the past: "amnesia as preferring the present to the past, nostalgia as preferring the past to the present, and melancholia as an inability to distinguish between the past and the present" (54). Through his analysis, Etkind shows that the majority of book titles in contemporary Russia (especially in the period from 2004 until 2008, when the research was conducted) deal with two tragic dates: The Great Terror (1937) and the beginning of the Great Patriotic War (1941) with Stalin being the most referenced political figure. Instead of focusing on the expected victory of Russia in the War, readers prefer books about these dramatic events proving, as Etkind argues, "the active and continuing, though not acknowledged, immersion into the darkest parts of the Soviet past – a feature of melancholy" (55). Instead of a nostalgic longing for the past, Russian society or at least the Russian reading public remains ambivalent about the legacy of the Soviet Union, reflecting upon it, while it treats it as the main navigator towards the country's future.

When trying to interpret Russia's paradoxical collective memory, one should delve into the historical conscience of the Russian population. For starters, the two main events that have traumatized the Soviet and post-Soviet collective memory are the Stalinist 'Great Terror' and the collapse of Soviet Union. Regarding the 'Great Terror', almost 80 years have passed, and the episodic memory has started to fade away, diminishing the emotional burden. While the historical distance grows, Russians are less and less interested in the atrocities of the Stalinist era and they reject both guilt and responsibility. But without remorse and repentance, it seems impossible to move forward; the past will hinder every move. Khazanov argues that it is necessary for the existence of a contiguous and cohesive collective memory to allow individual memories to be part of the public dialogue and discourse and to be acknowledged by the official historiography (294).

In the case of Russia, the stories of the victims have long been repressed leaving blank spots in the collective remembrance and

ambiguity about the extent of the human tragedy, which was, in turn, severely downplayed by the official discourse. Jones writes: "trauma can give rise to fragmented selves, as survivors struggle to control and articulate 'unspeakable' and 'pathogenic' memories" (347).

An inconsistent and discontinuous collective memory is more vulnerable to manipulation and non-critical acceptance of propaganda. By influencing what is to be remembered and what is to be forgotten, politicians aspire to manipulate the public opinion and manoeuvre its decisions. As far as the breakup of the USSR is concerned, the adversities and the rapid decline in living standards resulting from the traumatic transition to capitalism make many Russians reminisce about the socialist regime with its extended social safety net (Khazanov 299). The times of living a predetermined and simple life, provided by a superpower, are idealized in a way that ignores tragic historical events and periods. Coming into terms with the simultaneously traumatic and glorious past and critically establishing polyvocality as the main approach to history is the only way-out of the post-Soviet political melancholia and towards a reconstituted collective memory.

The Concept of Resilience

The notion of resilience has been employed in a wide variety of fields that include ecology, psychology, management and engineering. In psychology, resilience has been a rather popular term that has been used in many different ways. A presentation of the different definitions of the term seems necessary before introducing the term to the field of post-Soviet memory studies. The most common definition of the term is "the capability and ability of an element to return to a stable state after a disruption" (Bhamra, Dani & Burnard 5376). In this sense, adversity amounts to a disruption of a person's typical and proper state. To return to homeostasis is a process that should not be over-simplified, as it often varies significantly from individual to individual with highly differentiated outcomes. A pre-disturbance position might be impossible to reach, since the traumatic experience leaves traces on the person that experienced it. Resilience is also associated with the ability to recover from loss or trauma, highlighted by cases such as the psychopathological anxiety disorder PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) (Bonanno,

Westphal, and Mancini 512). For Bonanno the coping process is related to recovery and not resilience (20). For him, resilience is the ability to preserve homeostasis without significant interruptions and systematic discontinuities. Homeostasis is the internal stability and balance of organisms, a dynamic condition of equilibrium. Rutter proposes a theorization of resilience as the "steeling" outcome of stressful situations or trauma (337). In this account, resilience is regarded as a coping outcome, as a gradual and acquired immunity to future hardships. Exposure to adversities can either increase or diminish the vulnerability of individuals. In case of a decrease in vulnerability, the resilient individuals can cope more successfully with further unpredictable misfortunes. One final approach is that of resilience as a trait, a personal characteristic that some people possess. In this case, resilience relates to skills like flexibility, equanimity and ingenuity, as skills that allow a person to bounce back quickly or to limit the effects of an imbalance. Reflecting on the different approaches to resilience, it appears that resilience can be viewed as an inherent quality (that some may not possess), as an acquired skill that can be 'learned', or as transmittable quality that can be passed from one person to another.

In the study of the Soviet and post-Soviet era, resilience constitutes a theoretical concept of high significance, since the collective historical traumas of the past are still relevant. Kirschenbaum in her article on the children's traumatic stories during Leningrad's blockade writes about the role that resilience played in personal narratives and how it was used by the official regimental discourse as a means of propaganda (522). Describing a traumatic situation during warfare, she suggests that the Western concept of trauma, as an aftermath of hardship and adversity, might not be applicable in the case of the USSR because the official discourse promoted stoicism and endurance, thus denying the existence of psychological trauma (524). This 'meaning system' could not change the actual traumatic experience, though it considerably affected the construction of memories. As Merridale supports, the "history of individual trauma" ('Collective' 50) was influenced by the politics of repression and the myth of Soviet heroism ('Night' 251). The denial of trauma in the official propaganda, which was conveniently translated to heroism, also corresponded to the peoples' need for survival. The

undeniable and extraordinary hardships of the period left the Soviet population no choice but to cope silently and stoically, in order to appear resilient in the eyes of the Soviet state. At the same time, Merridale notes that 'the Leningrad hypertension', the phenomenon of the Leningraders' post-traumatic neurosis, "was neglected and forgotten partly because there were so few resources to attend to" (239). Despite the fact the victims were numerous, survivors' personal stories were repressed or ignored not only during the Great Terror and the Great Patriotic War but in general (Jones 348). Jones challenges Merridale's argument on the constant repression of trauma in the Soviet period maintaining that in Khrushchev's Thaw (1953-1964) a "narrative of healing emerged to compensate for, and ultimately to redeem, the 'gloomy' memories" of the Stalinist regime (349). Yet, the narrative of healing was constructed at that time in a way to distance the communist party from Stalin's supporters, to control the public expression of trauma and resilience, as well as to "shame other victims out of pathological attitudes to past trauma" (Jones 353). Svetlana Alexievich's work has come to fill the gaps of this fragmented, constructed and reconstructed collective memory offering consolation through the acceptance of the various official and unofficial resilience stances.

Narratives of Resilience and Non-Resilience in *Secondhand Time*

The novel *Secondhand Time* focuses on the traumatic transition from communism to capitalism following the dissolution of USSR. The adaptation to the new era demanded that the Soviet population be ready for radical changes in every aspect of their lives. Capturing a wide range of different stances to change, Alexievich offers a unique, polyphonic collection of narratives on resilience and non-resilience. Polyphony is achieved through the documentation of all the different approaches to resilience analyzed previously, including those cases when people were unable to adapt and accept the transformation of their sociopolitical reality. The material used for the present novel consists of fragments of memory that Alexievich carefully and compassionately places into the collective mnemonic mosaic. She asks her readers to look at the resulting artwork and reflect on human nature. The analysis of *Secondhand time* will be divided into two parts, with the first part giving examples of

different resilience stances and strategies, and the second presenting narratives of non-resilience.

Under the theme of resilience, three main narratives can be found. The first narrative refers to cases of embracing the new era emphatically or reluctantly. In many stories, there are people who seized every opportunity for enrichment even if it meant participation in a criminal organization (*'Who were these people? These strangers appeared out of nowhere—and they somehow knew everything. "We understand your trouble. We're here to help." They made a phone call, a doctor came over immediately and issued a death certificate, then a policeman arrived';* Alexievich, 'Secondhand' 308*)* or finding their place in the new system (*"Some went into business … The second secretary runs a movie theater. One district committee instructor became a priest"*; Ibid 72). Highly adaptable people didn't mind making profit from symbolic items of the Soviet era since the market showed relevant interest (*"And Soviet war medals! Orders of Lenin and the Red Banner. Medals! 'For Valor' and 'For Military Service.' […] All of them were real. Precious. Soviet army uniforms, jackets, and greatcoats … peaked caps with red stars … being sold for dollars"*; Ibid 95). Even though for some switching was easy and happened fast, others experienced the adaptation as a long, coping process and moved forward rather reluctantly. One voice recounts that it took her years to change her mentality (*"That's how zombified we all were. I spent years scrubbing away my Soviet mentality, dredging it out of myself by the bucketful";* Ibid 62), while another remembers that *"it was as though everyone had changed into gray costumes. All the colors had faded"* (307) underlying the suffering and the in-betweenness of people that transformed them into colorless existences.

In other narratives resilience is articulated as a trait or a skill associated with people's lifestyle, age and frame of mind. In one of the two main accounts of this narrative, the voice affirms his greater resilience than others, since he was a 'country boy' and *"[c]ountry boys are tougher than city folk […] [m]ore used to death"* (Ibid 268), and they were used to killing animals. In the transitional period of the 1990s, deaths skyrocketed as a result of living standards' dropping and organized crime becoming common place. In the second account, a woman narrates her success story which was made possible thanks to

her very strong, ambitious and resilient character: *"I came to Moscow ten years ago. I was wild, fired up, I told myself that I was born to be happy, that only the weak suffer, and modesty is nothing but adornment for the weak"* (Ibid 321). For her, the transition was much easier for young people who were ready to take risks and do anything in their power to get to the top: *"There's one thing I know for sure: Capitalism was not what my parents ordered. No two ways about it. It's what I ordered, it's made for people like me, who didn't want to stay in the cage. The young and the strong. For us, capitalism was exciting … Adventures in enterprise, risk … It's not just about money"* (Ibid 322–323). Even though she presents herself as an extraordinary person - whose difference was evident from an early age (self-made and hard-working), she actually represents a group of people who later received the name Novie Russkie (New Russians), with its elite forming the Russian oligarchs (Schimpfössl 4).

The main corpus of resilience narratives is connected to various resilience strategies that the voices have employed in their life and in their endeavor to survive, to adapt and even to prosper. A resilience strategy encountered in the novel is related to the engagement with art and literature. A representative example from the book is that of a woman, well-adapted to the new era, who occasionally feels the need to visit an art gallery and gaze at the paintings: *"One of the paintings had all this light in it and a woman standing on a bridge. Gazing off into the distance … There was so much light … I couldn't look away. I'd leave and come back, I was so drawn to it. Maybe I too could have had another life. I just don't know what it would have been like"* (Alexievich, 'Secondhand' 72–73). Art can act as a short-term, imaginary getaway, a refuge from everyday difficulties and hardships. She can recharge herself through daydreaming about another life, before going back to her everyday struggle. A similar therapeutic distraction, which supposedly assists in coping with reality, is related to consumerism and shopping. The notion of when a person does not buy what is needed but buys for the sake of buying is voiced in the narrative as: *"You want to spoil yourself, indulge. It's therapeutic. We're all so sick"* (Ibid 135). This attitude also reveals the importance that access to commodities and the free market played in general for the Soviet people, from Perestroika onwards. A type of shopping mania was a phenomenon of the era and corresponded to the

psychological needs of a nation that had experienced long periods of repression and a shortage of goods (Barker 13; Trudolyobov 32).

In the same category of narratives regarding practices and attitudes that help someone cope with hardships, I subsume strategies related to the sociopolitical framework and the importance of interpersonal relationships. In one of the stories, we read: *"I can tell you with certainty that it's possible to live well in Russia as long as you stay out of politics"* (Alexievich, 'Secondhand' 282–283). Maintaining a distance from politics is expected advice in an ever-changing political atmosphere. Another recurring theme is that of getting through life by making light of everything: *"He didn't like being questioned … He had this bravado … always trying to make light of everything…this prisoner's habit of hiding everything serious behind jokes"* (Ibid 213). With this resilience strategy, the person tries to understate a situation, to bring some easiness, or to encourage others to change their perspective on the problem. When an imbalance resulting from adversity lasts longer than expected, bouncing back quickly is not always a choice. In one of the most shattering stories, the voice ends her life-narrative by stating that: *"Now I want to live with every fiber of my being, all because of my Zhenya … I even dream of us having a baby someday … The doctors are against it, but that's my dream. I want us to have a home together; my whole life, I've wanted a home"* (Ibid 318). This excerpt reflects on the significance of personal relationships in hard times by underling that living through hardships is possible if someone is supported by loved-ones. Life becomes again meaningful and worth fighting for. If it is not possible to have the company of real people, then imagination can be the only choice: help. *"The scraps … Where had those bits of fabric come from? They were many different colors, a lot of them magenta. Someone had brought them to me and I sewed little people out of them. I would cut off pieces of my hair to make them hairdos. They were my friends … I'd never seen a doll, I didn't know a thing about them"* (Ibid 221). This narrative is not related to the post-dissolution era, yet it represents a common behavioral pattern of children trying to deal with difficulties by creating an imaginary social circle. This practice has usually a limited duration. At the same time, resilience is witnessed in the way that the child overcame the limitation of materials and toys and managed to create its own world.

The last category of narratives on resilience is the one dedicated to surviving mechanisms. These narratives are found in some of the most tragic stories of the book, which are the most confessional due to the fact that people were ashamed of their personal experiences and the past actions that helped them survive. The narrators were additionally embarrassed, given that as citizens of the recently collapsed Soviet Union they had to show the Soviet ethos of courage, endurance and steadfastness. Nevertheless, many were proven resilient and resourceful and adapted to the requirements of the period when the social infrastructure collapsed: *"The great Russian intelligentsia did what it could to survive. People remembered the old recipes … what they ate during the war … In the hidden corners of the parks and on sloping plots off the railroad tracks, people planted potatoes. Does eating nothing but potatoes for weeks on end count as going hungry? […] There was no milk, but there was plenty of ice cream, so that's what we made porridge with. Would I still eat that today?"* (Ibid 155). In general terms, people had to change jobs and find new ways to get money and 'Going into business' was a one-way street. Yet, going into the market meant different things and depended on the opportunities that everyone had: *"Then I went into 'business.' I started selling cigarette butts. A liter jar of butts … or a three-liter jar of butts … My wife's parents (college professors) collected them off the street, and I would sell them. And people would buy them! Smoke them"* (Ibid 134). Still, even finding a job, left many devastated with the loss of their social status: *"My friend, she and I went to college together, she's a housekeeper for this businesswoman, she walks her dog … essentially, she's a servant. She used to cry from the humiliation, but now she's used to it. I couldn't do it"* (Ibid 282). In this excerpt, resilience represents a coping process which results in acceptance and adaptation in accordance with the principles of homeostasis. While on one hand resilience might mean return to a previous state of balance after a disruptive event, on the other resilience can be translated as acceptance of the new state when the change is permanent.

At the same time, there is another side to resilience, that of non-resilience. Non-resilience is the opposite to successful adaptation, to the ability to 'play by the new rules. Non-resilient characters look for different ways to evade reality by either imaginatively recreating their

previous life or escaping altogether. In the post-Soviet context, the people who resist change and still support the Soviet regime are called informally 'Sovoks' deriving from 'Homo Sovieticus', the ideal of the creation of a new person under communism (Bogdanov 179; Hansen and Kaiser 127). In Alexievich's novel there are many descriptions and definitions of who can be called 'sovok': *"Now, this is the sovok.' People live very poorly, even by Russian standards. They blame the rich and resent everyone. Blame the government. They feel that they've been lied to, that no one had told them that there was going to be capitalism; they thought that socialism was just going to get fixed."* ('Secondhand' 46). 'Sovok' can be regarded as synonymous to non-resilience, as sovoks are people stuck in the past refusing to accept that the Soviet Union collapsed. In the narratives, sovok's portraits are constructed on a basis of denial, resistance and tragedy, and as living monuments of the Soviet Union. The heritage of the Soviet Union lives through the sovoks who, even though they are scattered in different states, share a cultural memory: *"Homo sovieticus isn't just Russian, he's Belarusian, Turkmen, Ukrainian, Kazakh. Although we now live in separate countries and speak different languages, you couldn't mistake us for anyone else. We're easy to spot! People who've come out of socialism are both like and unlike the rest of humanity"* (Ibid 13). At the same time, sovoks are presented as immature people (*"I don't like the word 'sovok'! My parents aren't sovoks, they're romantics! Toddlers living adult lives";* (Ibid 323) or as obstacles to actual change (*What's there to talk about with sovoks? We just have to sit tight until they all die out and then remake everything the way we think it ought to be";* (Ibid 277).

More specifically, denial and resistance to change (the first of the two dimensions of the 'sovok' phenomenon) are extensively represented in the stories. In one account, denial is embodied in the form of a person's nervous breakdown who realised the changes that they were expected to undertake (*"The director of the Party bureau had a nervous breakdown and spent a long time in the hospital recovering";* Ibid 72). By resisting change a person practically lives in the past, in a non-existing timeframe (*"You should never go back to the past. Because … Yes … But me, I practically ran there! I was dying to go. Fifty years … For fifty years, I kept returning to that place … In my thoughts, I was there day and night";*

Ibid 252). In another narrative, denial reaches a psychopathological level with the voice consciously rejecting information and events that could sully the memory of the Soviet Union: *"I can't get excited about this new life! I'm not going to do well, I'm never going to be happy on my own. Alone. And life keeps pulling and pulling me into this muck. Down to the earth. My children already live according to these new laws. [...] I'm a rare specimen! A therapist's dream ... isn't that right? You're very lucky to have found me"* (Ibid 99). In this passage an interesting juxtaposition is found: the mother, a middle-aged if not an elderly person, is incapable of changing, while her children successfully adapt to the new era and do not seem as traumatised by their mother or by the transition. The interconnection between age and adaptability is a repetitive theme in the narratives.

The other dimension of sovok, the nostalgia of Soviet life, constitutes a notion that has been widely theorized, by significant academics such as Svetlana Boym'. According to Boym, there are two types of nostalgia: the restorative and the reflective. The first refers to a process of resituating and reconstructing a certain lost locus (i.e. the home), in the present, while the second focuses on reminiscing and longing (Boym 13). Alexievich shows special interest in narratives of nostalgia trying to capture all its facets. One of the things that was lost, and that people have been nostalgic about, is social life as constructed under communism. In many cases, social and personal relationships did not survive the transition from the Soviet to the post-Soviet era leaving an empty place in peoples' lives (*"I still miss the girls from my department—the girls, in particular, our chatter. Work came second; socializing, our banter, came first";* Alexievich, 'Secondhand' 282). At the same time, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, a part of the population lost their special position in society. The narrator tells the story of a deceased Soviet veteran who visited every year the fortress of Brest where he fought: *"Why did he visit so often? Like his friends from his regiment who would meet him here, he only felt truly safe at the fortress. Here, nobody ever doubted that these veterans were our nation's true — and not imaginary — heroes"* (Ibid 182). For that single day when he was visiting the fortress, he was still a hero, a cornerstone in the cultural imagination of his nation. By going back every year, he insisted on re-experiencing something that had already

ceased to exist. Nostalgia also appears as a cultural trend and a political stand: *"There's a new demand for everything Soviet. For the cult of Stalin. Half of the people between the ages of nineteen and thirty consider Stalin an "unrivalled political figure"* (Ibid 19). Preferring places, services or items branded "Soviet" or buying Soviet symbols, like medals and uniforms, show the person's support for communism and longing for the Soviet regime; as well as in many cases a deep desire for its resurrection. These people are dissatisfied with the fact that Russia lost its world-status as a superpower and thus they are looking back to the past, ignoring the atrocities and the traumas that go with it: *"It's a mess out there. We need a Stalin"* (Ibid 261).

The other significant category of non-resilience narratives is related to escapism. In contrast with temporary escapist behaviors, such as an occupation with art, reading literature or shopping, and a child's imaginary doll companion, under non-resilience I subsume narratives of permanent escape from reality. The reason behind this distinction lies in the fact that these temporary escapist strategies are employed as a way to get by and to deal with life's struggles, but still they do not represent a permanent refuge from reality. In other words, non-resilience translates to a strong and stable stance characterised by non-adaptability and imbalance. More specifically, the examples of escapism from the book are: migration, monastery life and suicide. In all three cases, someone decides to follow the relevant path aiming at exiting for good from the reality as it was in the post-Soviet era. Starting with migration, the first significant wave of peoples' movement outside of Russia happens after the dissolution of USSR (*"I would like to leave this country or at least get my kids out of here. We're going to leave. The axe will survive the master";* Ibid 271). The social structure that supported them and guaranteed their living standards ceased to exist and people started looking for a better life. In most cases this was not because they refused to accept the new conditions, but because they couldn't see a future for themselves in Russia any longer. Nevertheless, connecting migration with non-resilience covers only one of the multiple aspects of the phenomenon. Moreover, escaping from the adversities of new life through monasticism represented a very traditional way out in the Christian world. A monastery is a protected environment, self-sustained,

providing food and a 'roof over the head', which are no more guaranteed for anyone: *"Six months later, I got a letter from her: "I'm joining a monastery. I want to live. I will pray for everyone"* (Ibid 239–240). With its strict rules and boundaries, a monastery could be regarded as a metaphoric equivalent to the Soviet Union. The last case of escapism, suicide, appears mainly in three shattering stories: the story of a man whose life was meaningless after retirement (Ibid 80), the story of the Soviet veteran who eventually took his own life (Ibid 182–183) and the story of a mother who got tired of unbearable living conditions (Ibid 317). The only irreversibly and undeniably non-resilient escaping choice is suicide. The three suicides represent different dimensions of rejection of the new reality. For the first, his Soviet ethos meant that an idle life wasn't worth living; for the second it was an eternal loneliness and the irreversible loss of social position as a veteran; for the third, the hardships exceeded the personal limits. If it is impossible for someone to adapt and is left with limited choices, suicide might be the only way out.

Conclusion

The post-Soviet and Russian collective memory with its 'blank spots' and discontinuities has resulted in an ambivalent and 'melancholic' stance towards the past and the Soviet legacy; exerting great influence on Russia's political path and worldview. Resilience might not play a significant role anymore in the political agenda and official discourse, but for the carriers of Soviet heritage and the survivors of the transition to capitalism the notions of resilience and non-resilience are still relevant. This is because the traumas persist for them and affect their perception of self and place in the world. Svetlana Alexievich draws from both personal experiences and the collective post-Soviet cultural memory moments of truth and offers her readers a representative and comprehensive account of the unwritten history of human struggle and tragedy.

In sum, Alexievich's choice of polyphonic novel or 'novel in voices' allows her on the one hand, given her focus on traumatic historic events and periods, to cover the whole resilience spectrum, including cases of non-resilience, while on the other, to challenge, reinforce and reconstitute on a literary level, a collective memory that embraces and

allows post-Soviet people to reconcile with the traumas of the past. When the official historiography fails to capture the diverse human experience, literature can effectively accommodate with respect and integrity the polyphonic memories of the witnesses. On a broader perspective, coming from a place of empathy and compassion Alexievich reflects on resilience as a philosophical standpoint towards the fluid, transient and ever-changing human condition. No one is in a position to judge or instruct others on how to cope with adversities and trauma, and no master narratives can nullify the personal accounts of the wounded.

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