Documenting and Mourning: Loss of Soviet Identity in Svetlana Alexievich's *Chernobyl Prayer*

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Abstract

This article argues that Svetlana Alexievich's *Chernobyl Prayer* operates on two simultaneous registers: the documentary, which records and archives the personal testimonies of the nuclear disaster, and the elegiac, which mourns not only contaminated land and ruined bodies but an entire worldview, a collective Soviet ontology, that the Chernobyl nuclear disaster made impossible to sustain. Drawing on the text's polyphonic witness-testimonies, its structural architecture, and its engagement with Soviet cultural mythology around science, heroism, and collectivity, the article demonstrates how Chernobyl functions in Alexievich's narrative as a catastrophic hinge point, marking the moment at which the ideological edifice of the USSR visibly and irreparably fractures. Reading Alexievich through the frameworks of ecstatic journalism (Chouliaraki) the paper positions *Chernobyl Prayer* as both a documentary monument and an elegy for the *homo sovieticus*.

Keywords: Svetlana Alexievich, Chernobyl, Soviet identity, testimony literature, elegy, documentary prose, ecstatic journalism.

Introduction

When Svetlana Alexievich received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2015, the Swedish Academy described her work as a "monument to suffering and courage in our time" ("The Nobel Prize"). The formulation rewards close attention. Categorizing her writing as a monument carries an implicit acknowledgement that it serves as both as an archive and a cenotaph. This dual function is nowhere more fully realised in Alexievich's work than in *Chernobyl Prayer* (1997), the text at the centre of her "Red Man Cycle", intended to render the Soviet soul at the moment of its dissolution. This paper argues that *Chernobyl Prayer* holds its documentary (record of dates, dosages, bureaucratic failures, the precise color and odor of the explosion's aftermath, the medical specificity of radiation-induced injury) and the elegiac function (the act of mourning, the contaminated land, destroyed bodies and a worldview no longer sustainable) in productive tension which gives the text its distinctive power. The witnesses who speak in the book grieve the irradiated steppe and the abandoned houses of Pripyat but this grieve is enmeshed with the ideological universe created by the Soviet propaganda. As Paul Josephson has shown, the nuclear technology occupied a

special place in the former USSR's cultural imagination. The success of the Soviet nuclear program undergirded the feeling of collective heroism and the possibility of creating a utopia. (170-74). When the Chernobyl Reactor Number Four exploded, it also imploded some of the fundamental mythologies of the Soviet people. Alexievich has herself spoken about this in an interview, "it was not only the reactor's roof that exploded," she continues, "Chernobyl blew up our whole worldview, it undermined the very foundations of the Soviet system" (Lucic). In this paper, I will show how in *Chernobyl Prayer*, the documentary surface ultimately encompasses this profound ontological bereavement.

Documenting

Alexievich's method, which she has described as a search for "a literary method that would allow the closest possible approximation to real life" (qtd. in "The Nobel Prize"), is formally archival. *Chernobyl Prayer* is composed of polyphonic monologues gathered from survivors, liquidators, scientists, physicians, wives, and children, what Leona Toker, writing on documentary prose, qualifies as information drawn from the private domain and from privileged access, brought into dialogue with material already available publicly (193). The text's structure reinforces this archival ambition, dividing into choirs (the Soldiers' Choir, the Folk Choir, the Children's Choir) nested within chapters ("Land of the Dead", "The Crown of Creation", "Admiring Disaster") and framed by Alexievich's self-interview. Each voice is a document and together the book as a whole acquires the magnitude of the record of civilizational collapse.

The documentary impulse is particularly manifested in the text's accumulation of physical and biological detail. Alexievich opens with a factual summary of deaths, dosages, and territorial contamination before releasing the testimonies. The effect is to establish verifiability as a cornerstone of the project, in the manner Toker identifies as essential to documentary prose (193). When Lyudmila Ignatenko, wife of the dead fireman Vasily Ignatenko, describes in the first "A Lone Human Voice" section how the firefighters who responded to the explosion "didn't have their canvas suits on, they left just in the shirts they were wearing" (Alexievich 6), the reader has already been given, in the preceding factual chapter, the information that first responders were systematically denied protective equipment. Testimony and documentation therefore mutually authenticate each other. The reader, already equipped with the archival frame, can almost foresee the devastating conclusion. *Chernobyl Prayer* is filled with bodies suffering the effect of radiation because of the lack of right protective equipment. The wife of a cleanup worker describes her husband's deterioration in harrowing detail, noting a black growth spreading across his face and body as his neck and tongue were visibly altered by radiation (Alexievich 287-88). Children are born with sealed mouths but open eyes (94). Women report an extraordinarily high rates of reproductive organ removal in the radioactive zone (63). This medical precision, other than cataloging the diseased bodies also renders radiation, which has no smell, colour, or sound (Alexievich 28), legible through its impact on the surface of the body.

Yet, Alexievich is fully aware of the limit of the documentary. She writes, "The truth is that facts alone were not enough," she continues in her self-interview; "we felt an urge to look behind the facts, to delve into the meaning of what was happening" (26). It is at this threshold, where documentation encounters its own insufficiency, that the elegiac takes over.

Creating an Elegy

Elegy, in its classical formulation, is a poem of mourning for the dead. But the elegiac mode can be extended to the lamentation of ways of life, of belief systems, of the coherent ontologies that give individual lives their meaning and direction. It is in this expanded sense that *Chernobyl Prayer* will be read as an elegy, an elegy for the entire cultural and ideological universe of Soviet modernity.

To appreciate the depth of what is mourned, one must understand what was at stake in the Soviet relationship to nuclear science. As has been stated above, the Bolshevik project from its inception yoked the promise of communist utopia to the transformative power of the nuclear energy. The nuclear energy had such an influence on the Soviet psyche because it was a way to electrify the whole country, literally bringing the nation from darkness into light. Lenin's famous slogan, "Communism is Soviet power plus the electrification of the whole country," was not merely a policy statement, it was a deeply held belief. When Reactor Number Four exploded on April 26, 1986, it quashed this belief in the possibility of the revolutions power to enlighten and sustain the whole civilization. Alexievich's witnesses register this collapse of the civilization. As the historian Alexander Revalsky says in his monologue, "Chernobyl brought down an empire. It cured us of Communism. It cured us of feats of heroism no better than suicide, of terrifying ideas" (Alexievich 213). The ironical tone does not take anything away from the profound sense of mourning. The cure has left its patients bereft of the world they had inhabited. It must be obvious from the significance given to electrification as metaphor for enlightenment how much the Soviets valued the symbolic. In the text we find several witnesses intensely mourning, the evacuation of meaning from the language and symbolic architecture of Soviet heroism. In the immediate aftermath of the explosion, the only available schema through which the disaster could be understood was that of war and thus the red flags acquired a special importance. This had an unintended effect, as one cleanup worker narrates, "within a few days of the accident, the red flag was flying over Reactor No. 4. There it proudly fluttered, until a few months later it was ravaged by the tremendous radiation. So they raised a new flag. And another" (Alexievich 103). The symbolic value of planting a flag over an exploded reactor was a typical form of Soviet propaganda, but the fact that it was continuously destroyed by the radiation was also typical of the later years of the Soviet Union, encapsulating how the material fact – of radiation, of lived reality - was always going to breach the propaganda containment, creating a horrific mockery of any symbols by operating entirely outside the understanding of people who had been taught to worship at the altar of science.

It is this gap, between the symbolic apparatus of Soviet propaganda which built the Soviet identity and the new irradiated reality which propels the elegiac core of Alexievich's text.

Chernobyl as Hinge Point and The Fracture of Soviet Identity

A hinge connects two surfaces that must subsequently open away from each other, it is the juncture that makes separation possible. Chernobyl is the hinge in Alexievich's text precisely because it is the event that makes visible, and irreversible, the separation between the Soviet ideological self-image and the reality it had been obscuring. This fracture had been forming even before April 26, 1986. The stagnation era had eroded the productive mythology of Stalinist scientific heroism and Afghanistan had detonated the

mythology of Soviet international brotherhood. However, the Chernobyl struck at the very foundation of the Soviet identity, the idea of a scientific civilization and collectivity. This fracture is enacted at the level of individual subjectivity as much as at the level of the collective society. Earlier, as Gennady Grushevoy, chairman of the Children of Chernobyl Foundation, mentions, the idea of Soviet being was defined by this sense of collectivity, "A hybrid between a prison and a kindergarten, that's what Socialism is, Soviet Socialism. A citizen surrendered his soul to the state, his conscience, his heart, and in return received his rations for the day" (Alexievich 154). The metaphor of the prison-kindergarten captures precisely the paternalistic dependency that structured Soviet identity, the state as simultaneously oppressive and nurturing, demanding total submission in exchange for the certainty of being provided for. The witnesses in *Chernobyl Prayer* are characterized almost universally by a sense of ontological displacement, that is, they felt that they could no longer inhabit this prison-kindergarten world they had previously occupied. For example, Zoya Danilovna Bruk, the nature conservation inspector who knowingly issued false certificates for building on radioactive land, reflects on the post-Chernobyl reconfiguration of selfhood with striking clarity, "Suddenly, we had this new, unfamiliar awareness that each of us had his or her own life. Until then, that hadn't seemed to matter" (Alexievich 205). In the context of Soviet collectivism, this "unfamiliar awareness" of individual life represents a redefinition characterized by the discovery of the self as irreducible to the collective which shows simultaneously an index of the collective's failure and a mourning for the comfort of submission to it. It is as if the experiment designed to split the atom, split the Soviet society. What Chernobyl destroyed was not merely the state's claim to infallibility but the psychological architecture of this dependency, of the assurance that submission was meaningful, that sacrifice was rewarded, that the collective would protect those who surrendered their individuality to it. The witnesses mourn the loss of this assurance even as they recognise, and sometimes celebrate, its exposure as a lie.

Here the elegiac register reaches its most complex and paradoxical expression. The mourning in *Chernobyl Prayer* is not straightforwardly the mourning of the oppressed for a world they are glad to have left behind. It is a more difficult mourning, the mourning of those for whom the very belief system that oppressed them was also the source of their sense of meaning, purpose, and collective belonging. Natalia Arsenyevna Roslova, chairwoman of the Mogilyov Women's Committee, captures this in a passage of extraordinary elegiac intensity, "What is buried there is not only their home but a whole epoch. An epoch of faith. In science! In an ideal of social justice! A great empire came apart at the seams, Collapsed… When the empire disintegrated, we were on our own" (Alexievich 268). The final phrase registers the existential desolation of a subjectivity that had been constituted through collective identity and now finds itself stripped of that framework.

Ecstatic Journalism and the Production of the Elegiac Archive

Alexievich's capacity to sustain both registers simultaneously is, in large part, a function of her generic innovativeness, what she and her critics have identified as her unique blend of journalism and literature, documentation and art. In the framework developed by Lilie Chouliaraki in *The Spectatorship of Suffering*, a framework that has proved productive for reading *Chernobyl Prayer*, this mode of

representation is identified as "ecstatic journalism". It is a form of disaster reporting in which spectators reflexively share with sufferers the same humanity and the same potential destiny (Chouliaraki 181). Unlike conventional disaster reportage, ecstatic journalism does not maintain the distance of objectivity. Rather it depends on implicating the reader in the suffering it records. Chouliaraki identifies three structural moments that can be traced across *Chernobyl Prayer*, firstly, signaling, through the repetition of scenes that establish a shared reality, secondly, framing, through emotional description by insiders that articulates the reader's own inchoate response, and lastly, evaluation, through commentary by experts who contextualise the event within cultural myth (175-81).

All three structural moments are present in the text. The signalling function is performed by the relentless accumulation of testimony, "I never saw the explosion itself. Only the flames. Everything was kind of glowing. The whole sky" (Alexievich 6) and "The smoke hanging over the power plant wasn't black or yellow, it was blue, it had this blue tinge" (114). These scenes, repeated in variation across dozens of testimonies, make cognitively assimilable what would normally resist comprehension. The framing function is performed by the "A Lone Human Voice" sections. Such as Lyudmila Ignatenko's account of her husband's irradiated death, with its intimate oscillation between pre-Chernobyl tenderness and post-Chernobyl horror, externalises and articulates the affective response that the reader brings to the text. The evaluative function belongs to the philosophers, historians, and scientists whose monologues thread through the main choirs, such as Alexander Revalsky's historical contextualization, Vasily Nesterenko's advocacy of humility before nature, and Lilia Kuzmenkova's identification of Chernobyl as the founding event of a new Belarusian national identity.

Collectively these three moments sustain the elegiac register. When Kuzmenkova says, "Now we have become a people. The people of Chernobyl. Not just a stretch of the road from Russia to Europe or from Europe to Russia ... Art is remembrance. Remembrance of our having existed" (Alexievich 243), she is performing the elegiac function in its purest form, the transformation of catastrophe into identity, of destruction into the founding of a new, if desolate, collective selfhood. The new identity is constituted by what has been lost and now the "people of Chernobyl" are defined by the ruin of the world they previously inhabited.

Conclusion

Chernobyl Prayer is, in the end, both a documentary archive and an elegy, and it is the inseparability of these two functions that constitutes the text's most significant contribution to the literature of catastrophe and Soviet dissolution. The documentary register, encompassing testimonies, medical details, and factual chapters, provides the evidentiary foundation that gives the elegiac register its moral authority. An elegy cannot rest on sentiment alone, it must be grounded in the specificity of what was lost, in the irreducible singularity of each destroyed body, each evacuated village, each cancelled future. Alexievich's patient gathering of voices and her refusal of fictional consolation are the conditions of possibility for the elegiac depth of the text.

Conversely, the elegiac register transforms what would otherwise be a powerful chronicle into a meditation on Soviet identity and its disintegration. Without it, the text would be a remarkable record of nuclear disaster. With it, the text becomes something more, a philosophical inquiry into the relationship between catastrophe and identity, between the destruction of a material world and the destruction of the meanings through which that world was inhabited. Chernobyl, in Alexievich's hands, is the hinge on which Soviet identity opens outward onto its own impossibility, the event that reveals, with the force of physical law, that the world the Soviet project promised could never have been built, and that the world it actually built was always already preparing its own desolation.

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