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Beyond Hating War: On Reading Svetlana Aleksievich's "Tsinkovye mal′chiki" ("Boys in Zinc") in 2025

Abstract: This essay revisits Svetlana Aleksievich's *Tsinkovye mal′chiki (Boys in Zinc)* from the vantage point of July 2025, the third year of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine. While praised for its humanism and anti-war stance, Boys in Zinc reveals troubling silences. The testimonies focus on material and logistical failures of the Soviet Army yet ignore the routine killing of civilians. Equally absent is any discussion of sexual violence, despite its prominence in Aleksievich's earlier work. The book also limits parenthood to mothers, erasing fathers' voices and reflecting a gendered silence around grief and responsibility. By framing war solely as personal tragedy and loss, it risks presenting a false symmetry between occupiers and the occupied, redirecting empathy toward the invaders while obscuring violence inflicted upon the Afghan civilians. This essay argues that critical reading must address whose suffering is seen, whose voices are missing, and how narratives of imperial defeat can become evasive forms of humanism that blur political and moral accountability.

Keywords: Svetlana Aleksievich, "Boys in Zinc", the Soviet-Afghan war, nonfiction, 'dokumental′naia proza'

As I write these words, it is July 2025, the third year of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine. In the morning, friends and friends of friends are posting pictures on social media from Ukrainian cities under Russian attack. They are reporting yet another terrible night spent sleepless, hiding in shelters or metro stations. During the day, photos of yet another tragedy are appearing, this time from the Kherson countryside, not far from the frontline: Russians deliberately targeted and killed a one-year-old boy with a drone while he was playing in a yard with his great-grandmother. His name was Dmytrushka.

It is July 2025, and I am trying to re-read Svetlana Aleksievich's *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* (*Boys in Zinc*, 1989), her book about the Soviet war in Afghanistan during the 1980s (Aleksievich 1991).

A Soviet polyphony

Aleksievich's biography illustrates well the complexity of life for people born and raised in the Soviet Union. She was born in 1948 in an Eastern Galician town whose many name changes reflect the turbulent history of this part of Europe: until 1919, it was Austrian Stanislau; in 1919, Ukrainian Stanislaviv; from 1919 to 1939, Polish Stanisławów; from 1939 to 1941, Soviet Ukrainian Stanislav; from 1941 to 1944, Nazi German Stanislau; and from 1944 to 1962, Stanislav once again. In 1962, it was renamed Ivano-Frankivs′k. Aleksievich's father was Belarusian, her mother Ukrainian. To this day, she writes in Russian, the Soviet lingua franca, even though her homeland is Belarus, where, incidentally, the USSR ceased to exist. In December 1991, at a dacha in a Belarusian forest, Russian president Boris El′tsin, Belarusian parliamentary chairman Stanislav Shushkevich, and Ukrainian president Leonid Kravchuk signed the Belavezha Accords, effectively dissolving the Soviet Union.

Aleksievich's work belongs to the Russophone tradition of nonfictional *dokumental'naia proza* ("documentary prose", see Basova 2009, Gurska 2017, Kuca 2018, cf. Kucharzewski 2024) offering razor-sharp insights into the essence of the Soviet world. Her style, built from "voices" – deeply personal, first-person stories – resembles the technique of Polish nonfiction writer Hanna Krall, author of *To Outwit God*, about the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of 1943 (Krall 1989, 1992). The role of confession and dialogue in the styles of Krall and Aleksievich can be seen as an echo of the polyphonic tradition in Eastern and Central European literature, exemplified by Bakhtin's famous observation on Fëdor Dostoevskii: "Dostoyevsky's hero is not an objectified image, but rather an autonomous word, *a pure voice*; we do not see him, we hear him"[1] (Bakhtin 1973: 43). Aleksievich tries to remain silent; she signals her presence but focuses on gathering single voices and presenting them as uninterrupted monologues. From these, she composes her polyphony – the polyphony of Soviet fates. Alongside the witnesses' accounts, the author shares her impres-

1 Bakhtin's emphasis.

sions, even if they remain in the narrative background. In Aleksievich's work, the Soviet Union reveals its many inhuman faces.

Appendix and further revisions

Tsinkovye mal'chiki appeared in various book editions; two are available in English and German.[2] The later ones include a large appendix. After the first publication of the book in 1989, Aleksievich was sued by two former interviewees, who felt offended by how they had been portrayed. The author received significant support from intelligentsiia circles and writers' organizations and ultimately won in court. Records from the trial, along with press releases, open letters, readers' opinions, and other documents from the time, were included in the book's later editions.

This appendix alone is fascinating. It makes clear that the sophisticated postmodern idea of treating all literary works (including nonfiction) solely as "texts" – independent of any "reality," "objectivity," or "truth" – is unworkable when dealing with books about the recent past and the lives of people who are still alive. The outraged readers who appeared in court, apparently unaware of the postmodern revolutions of Hayden White, Jacques Derrida, or Frank Ankersmit,[3] stubbornly demanded that nonfiction has to "tell the truth". They reacted with indignation when, in their view, it "falsified reality" and questioned the heroism of war veterans. A Western reader, especially one raised in a country like Germany, where the discourse of "postheroism" has become the cultural and political consensus (Münkler 2007), may feel a mix of wonder, amusement, pity, and contempt. Why are these people attacking a writer who so powerfully deconstructs heroic narratives and describes war's scars with insight and empathy? Why don't they understand freedom of speech? Why

2 Thus, two English titles: *Zinky Boys* (Alexievich 1992) and *Boys in Zinc* (Alexievich 2017). German editions: Alexijewitsch 1992 and Alexijewitsch 2016.

3 A perfect example of this approach is Hayden White's methodological paper *The Interpretation of Texts*, where one can read, among other statements: "The 'reading' of a 'work' is nothing other than a subordination of the reader's consciousness to the authority of a speaker of a discourse. 'Text' lays itself open to the reader's capacity to enter into the production of signification, allowing the reader thereby to enjoy a pleasure formerly presumed to be the privileged prerogative of 'authors'" (White 2010: 210).

are they angry with a writer describing war trauma rather than with the politicians who sent them to war?

Because of the extensive appendix, it is easy to overlook that *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* was revised in a very specific way: in some editions, several confession-like monologues were shortened, others extended, while others were removed entirely. The deleted fragments were often vivid and raw. One veteran, a former tank private, ends his story in 1991 edition with the resigned line: «Что-то с памятью… Остаются отрывки, осколки… Как будто со мной не было того, что было…» (Aleksievich 1991: 111).[4] But in the other edition, the interview ends differently. The interlocutor suddenly pulls out a bottle of vodka, pours himself a glass, knocks it back in one gulp, and bursts out in genuine, long-suppressed anger that spirals into a drunken rant, verging on a parody of the popular imagination of veteran trauma:

> К с…й матери эту жизнь! Эту войну! Жена сказала: «Ты – фашист!» – и ушла. Дочку забрала. […] Водки даме не предлагаю, а вина, блин, не имею, вино не употребляю. За любовь! […] Если бы я вернулся героем, жена бы от меня не ушла. Войну проиграли… Страна развалилась… За что женщинам уважать мужчин?! Блин!
> (Aleksievich 2007: 211f.)

> F… this life! F… this war! My wife said, 'You're a fascist!' – and left. She took our daughter with her. […] I won't offer the lady any vodka, and damn it, I don't have any wine – I don't drink it. Here's to love! […] If I'd come back a hero, my wife wouldn't have left me. We lost the war… The country fell apart… Why should women respect men?! Damn it!

In this version, the tanker's monologue ends with the melodramatic claim that women are more frightening than wars (Aleksievich 2007: 213).

Aleksievich also removed harsher formulations, including racial and homophobic slurs, as well as details that offered a more concrete picture of where her interviewees lived. As a result, the shorter edition gains a much

4 "Something's wrong with my memory… Only fragments remain… It's as if what happened never happened to me…".

greater 'universality' than the longer one; it is thus easier for readers to empathize with the protagonists of the Afghanistan stories.

Nonfiction literature: when aesthetics meets ethics

And this is exactly the moment when *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* becomes problematic. The fact that Aleksievich gives voice solely to one side – the Soviet side: former soldiers and their mothers, nurses, civil servants – and, despite her visit to Afghanistan, does not include a single interview with an Afghan person, is not merely an aesthetic decision. One can rightly ask: in a nonfiction book about the suffering and trauma caused by the war in Afghanistan, why are the immediate victims – Afghan men, women, and children – not asked about their suffering?

This may be the moment when the postmodern-raised reader realizes that traditional, conservative approaches that stubbornly link aesthetics with ethics and demand moral integrity (*finis operis*) from any literature that has ambition to be "good literature" are not entirely mistaken.[5] Moreover, the bare distinction between fiction and nonfiction reveals deep ethical consequences. In prose, fondness or sympathy for a fictional perpetrator like Rodion Raskolnikov remains within the sphere of play, toying with the reader's emotions and imagination. In nonfiction, one deals with actual cases: actual murders, actual torture, actual rapes. The victims and their suffering are real, requiring from the author a level of consideration that is redundant when writing prose (Szczygieł 2022).

It is July 2025, and I am trying to understand why *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* presents the war solely from the perspective of the occupier and aggressor, rendering Afghan people a nameless background for Soviet trauma. I am also thinking of the controversies a decade ago surrounding another brilliant nonfiction writer, Ryszard Kapuściński (1932–2007), as I feel his works need rereading and reconsideration, perhaps rehabilitation. Yes, Kapuściński fabricated entire stories, and the trustworthiness of his literary reportage has been questioned,

5 Medieval Christian aesthetics distinguished between two kinds of purpose: the artist's/worker's personal goal (*finis operantis*, e.g., earning a wage) and the inherent goal of the work itself (*finis operis*). An artist may have various reasons for creating, but the artwork itself is to be made with regard only to its own beauty and integrity. See Maritain [1920].

not without good reason. Yes, his literary world can be terribly androcentric, with women's roles reduced to caring for the household and children. Yes, his poetic and passionate portrayals of countries in the Global South are often both paternalistic and exoticizing (Domosławski 2013). Yet, when describing conflicts in Africa, Asia, and South America, Kapuściński consistently followed the principle of taking the perspective of the underprivileged, of those resisting colonizers, oppressors, and exploiters. The reader sees Angola, Iran, or Guatemala through their eyes, through their suffering, not through reports by those who brought violence under the banner of "law and order". In rare situations where he gives a voice to those who served an autocratic regime – as in *Cesarz* (*The Emperor*, 1978), perhaps his best-known book – he does so in a mockingly exaggerated and overwritten style that exposes not only the authoritarian mindset of the emperor's willing servants but also the defining features of undemocratic systems: the absence of checks and balances, the propaganda of success, the lack of transparency (Kapuściński 1978).

I find myself trying to imagine how Kapuściński would have written a book on the war in Afghanistan, remembering how empathically and insightfully he described in *Imperium* (*Imperium*, 1993) the colonial oppression of the native nations living within the Soviet Union (e.g., Bashkirs) – and the unhealing scars it left behind (Kapuściński 2007).

Testimonies without guilt, stories without fathers

It is July 2025, and I am noticing that concerns raised in the testimonies in *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* on the state of the Soviet Army are almost exclusively material and technical: poor logistics, nepotism, theft of weapons and equipment, the brutality of "the wave" (*dedovshchina*),[6] the lack of support for veterans and their families upon their return (especially when they come back disabled), and the shocking disregard for the bodies of fallen soldiers – the disregard that is highlighted by the title of the book, referring to the characteristic zinc coffins used for transport. However, there is no concern over the fact that, in the eyes of Soviet Army soldiers, killing civilians – including children – and prisoners of war belongs to the same war routine as killing regular enemy soldiers. In other words, almost all veterans quoted by Alek-

6 See for instance Aleksievich 1991: 105f.; 2007: 200f.

sievich do not seem to understand that what they describe is, in fact, a record of their own war crimes. What is chilling is that Aleksievich simply repeats and shares this perspective without question. None of the veterans are introduced as war criminals. Nowhere in the book is there a reflection that this lack of basic military professionalism (like the inability to distinguish between armed enemy soldiers and civilians) undermines the very notion of an 'army' and suggests that a more fitting description would be 'armed thugs.' Instead, when *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* does address the Soviet Army's ineptitude, it almost exclusively concerns logistical failures or issues that affect Soviet soldiers and their families.

Furthermore, I am noticing that Aleksievich interviews two groups of people: those who served in Afghanistan themselves, and the mothers of fallen Soviet Army soldiers. Here, another question arises: why is there not a single story told by a father? Was it the author's deliberate decision to narrow parenthood to motherhood, reusing the classical myth of Niobe? Or did she simply find no fathers willing to share their experiences: perhaps because it was still too painful, or, conversely, because they had already processed their grief and saw no need to return to it? Or perhaps they never cared for their children at all? Whatever the reason, the complete absence of fathers' voices creates a portrait of a deeply dysfunctional masculinity – one that rejects, fears, or, at best, is unable or unwilling to find a vocabulary to speak about fatherhood. And since Aleksievich does not address these questions, the reader is left with the impression that, for her as an author, this is not a problem to be explored but the proper way of understanding parenthood.

Another striking absence in *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* is the topic of sexual violence. Striking because in Aleksievich's best-known book, *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* (*The Unwomanly Face of War*, 1985), which deals with the Second World War, rapes within the Soviet army are addressed openly (Aleksievich 1988). Female veterans recall the fear they felt toward their own comrades, recognizing that the threat of sexual violence did not come from the enemy. Yet in *Tsinkovye mal'chiki*, in both editions, this subject is absent entirely; the sole sexual issue that is mentioned is prostitution. The only crime that receives sustained attention is looting, a topic notably missing from *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso*, where there are no mentions, for example, of wrists weighed down with looted watches. In *Tsinkovye mal'chiki*, however, Aleksievich underscores how, for many Soviet people, the operation in Afghanistan became an opportunity

to bring home jeans or Japanese tape recorders, treating the war as a shopping expedition rather than a military operation.[7] Since it is July 2025, I recall the shock of the first images from Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine: looted washing machines, toasters, microwaves strapped to tanks. Is that what historians call *longue durée*?

False symmetry, blind spots, and Ukrainian paradoxes

Western literary critics and scholars have often praised Aleksievich for her humanism and for deconstructing the official Soviet discourse of heroism. Her works stand as indictments of war itself, persuasively implying that war has no winners, that all sides lose. After all, if someone loses a beloved family member on the battlefield, does it truly matter who won the war?

But these framing risks are creating a false symmetry, suggesting that two equal forces are fighting each other and that suffering is evenly distributed. In *Tsinkovye mal'chiki*, Afghan mothers who lost their sons happen to be mentioned; their grief is comparable with that of Aleksievich's interlocutors. This is a powerful narrative figure, and it takes a moment to recognize its limits. On the emotional and personal level, each loss is a tragedy that shatters families and lives, and in that sense, these experiences are parallel. Yet on the political level, such symmetry blurs – and ultimately falsifies – the basic reality of the situation: Afghan soldiers did not invade the Soviet Union, did not kill its inhabitants, did not destroy schools and hospitals in Tomsk, Irkutsk, or Moscow. Moreover, even a brief look at the ratio of fallen Soviet Army soldiers to Afghan civilians killed is horrifying, even if one accepts the Soviet figures. This is why the "humanistic" approach that suggests both sides are victims is not only factually misleading but also morally questionable.

It is July 2025, and I cannot stop thinking of one-year old Dmytrushka, whom Russians deliberately targeted and killed with a drone. It is the third year of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, and the euphemisms coined during the Soviet-Afghan war – *gruz 200* ("cargo 200") or simply "200", referring to the weight of the coffin and of the soldier's body inside – are still in use. War analysts note that Russian military command, often staffed by veterans

7 «О деньгах говорим много. Больше, чем о смерти» (Aleksievich 1991: 18; „We talk a lot about money. More, even, than about death").

of Afghanistan such as General Sergei Surovikin – later known as the "Butcher of Syria" – views Ukrainian resistance as something to be crushed through intimidation and brute force. This logic underlies the large-scale drone and missile attacks on civilian and critical infrastructure as a matter of deliberate military strategy. On the other side (and here one cannot help but note the irony of history), veterans of Afghanistan also serve in Ukraine's forces,[8] including the current commander-in-chief, General Oleksandr Syrs′kyi. Over 160 thousand Ukrainians fought in Afghanistan; the veterans are officially recognized and receive state benefits. Monuments, plaques, and street names honoring soldiers in the Soviet-Afghan war are not subject to Ukraine's decommunization and de-russification laws.

After imperial loss

Tsinkovye mal'chiki fits into a pattern identified by postcolonial critiques of European and U.S. works that recast imperial failure as a source of moral reckoning – but only once military victory is out of reach. After all, neither in *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* nor in *Vremia sekond khėnd* (*Second-Hand Time*, 2013) does Aleksievich mention other Soviet military interventions in the context of trauma: Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968. Why? Because those interventions ended in victory? Because Soviet military losses were minimal?

It is July 2025, and I cannot resist the impression that *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* offers a powerful narrative that transforms imperial defeat into an emotionally compelling yet politically evasive form of humanism – one that redirects the reader's focus toward the invaders' failures and personal traumas, rather than the violence inflicted upon the occupied.

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8 Since 2014. See Ferris-Rotman 2015.

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