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The Soviet-Afghan War in Nonfiction: Svetlana Alexievich's *Zinky Boys*
and William T Vollmann's *An Afghanistan Picture Show*

BY

Madi Kudaibergen

NU Student Number: 201731668

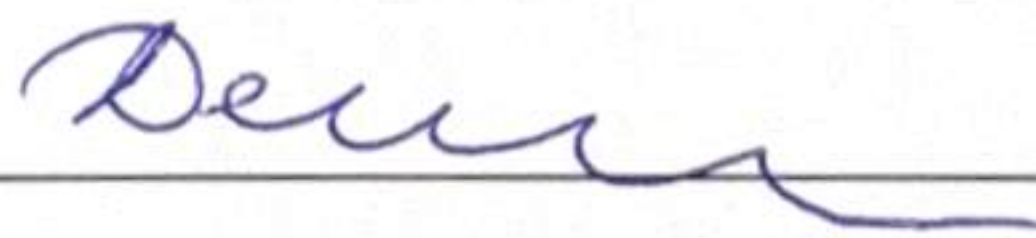
APPROVED

BY

Dr. Ivan Delazari

ON

The 14th day of April, 2026



Signature of Principal Thesis Adviser

In Agreement with Thesis Advisory Committee

Second Adviser: Dr. Mollie Arbuthnot

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Abstract

This thesis is a comparative study of William T Vollmann's *An Afghanistan Picture Show* (1992) and Svetlana Alexievich's *Boys in Zinc* (1989), an ethnographic memoir and an oral history capturing ordinary people's experiences across the front lines of the 1979–1989 Soviet-Afghan War. How does literature portray war? What makes creative nonfiction a valid historical source to be seen as a factual report of empirical reality? When official sources of information are limited or even non-existent, autobiographical prose and compiled witness testimonies become significant contributors to historical knowledge. The war lasted for an entire decade and became one of the causes of the collapse of the USSR, yet its media and scholarly coverage are relatively limited. A late postmodern American “hybrid” novelist's and a late Soviet Belarusian Nobel Prize-winning documentary writer's account of their interviewees' and their own personal experiences may have little statistical significance, but literature communicates past human lives importantly beyond quantitative data. This thesis analyses the two authors' narrative strategies in organising and communicating the fundamentally incomplete picture of the war and reflects on the advantages and limitations of documentary prose as a source on what it was and felt like.

Keywords: Soviet-Afghan war, documentary literature, Svetlana Alexievich, William T Vollmann

Introduction

Wars and military conflicts are happening all across the world. Currently, in Spring 2026, there are at least three active armed conflicts: Russia and Ukraine, Israel and Palestine, the US and Iran... For those, we have plenty of footage and immediate news reports. That is the case for 21st-century warfare, when information is uncontrollable, and official government propaganda of each side cannot heavily influence the majority of media conglomerates, grassroots media with unofficial channels and social media in general. But that was not the case with wars and conflicts prior to the third millennium.

After World War II, there was the Cold War between the US and the USSR, as two forces were opposing each other on the indirect battlefield. The latter period of that conflict had an impact on Afghanistan. The Soviet-Afghan War was a complex military conflict in Afghanistan between American, Soviet and Afghan armed groups. The USSR invaded the territory of Afghanistan in 1979 and withdrew from the war in 1989 (Barfield 2010, 170-171; Kalinovsky 2011, 1). The decade-long conflict was one of the causes of the fall of the USSR and one of its most silenced wars. One of the main issues with the Soviet-Afghan war is the lack of information about it in the public domain. The Soviet government was not unanimous on the Afghanistan issue. Official documents and other important artefacts have not been declassified to this day (McVicker 2019, 5-6). Considering additional sources on the war would be very beneficial in light of such informational lack and restricted access to the documents of the late Soviet Period.

The proposed additional source of information for a historical scholarship is non-fiction books from that period, like Svetlana Alexievich's *Boys in Zinc* (1989) and William T Vollmann's *An Afghanistan Picture Show: or How I Saved the World* (1992). Both books are non-fiction reports on the lives of individuals during the war and collections of otherwise unobtainable information. While traditional history scholars write their books on the main

actions and big decisions of state rulers and other people in charge of significant things, ordinary people's experience is often left out (McVicker 2019, 10). Wars are not only affecting military units and government officials: there are people out there whose lives are affected no less, or sometimes even more, because of the war. Svetlana Alexievich and William T Vollmann are thus giving a voice to people who otherwise would be silenced forever. These voices and narratives with almost unedited stories are communicating that kind of truth that people may seek but not find while revising and reading history textbooks. In the next decades, there will be fewer and fewer people who could tell their experiences from the Soviet-Afghan war, but Alexievich and Vollmann have given them a chance to be remembered. Through this research, I argue that non-fiction books and other forms of art should be considered as an important part of the historical revision or record of events. Especially, in this case, when the information is scarce and not much is left but the Soviet propaganda.

In this research, I make Vollmann's and Alexievich's non-fiction books the subject for a comparative analysis. Both authors tried to portray the war and the lives of people affected by it. *An Afghanistan Picture Show: or How I Saved the World* is a book about Vollmann's travel to Pakistan and the Afghanistan border during the Soviet-Afghan War in 1982: "This work for its part has been similarly revised, ossified and prissified. I hope that it is still honest nonetheless" (Vollmann 1992, xv). At the same time, Vollman gives a right away confession on editing and revising some of the interviews and stories he had from meeting Mujahideens. Due to the technical issues and language barrier, his interviews are not one hundred per cent correct, as it is acknowledged in his notes, only eighty per cent is correct (Interview transcript). Still, the main value in Vollmann's book is his precise, meticulous writing and naivety that he had back in the 80's. Because of Vollmann, there is a chance for us to see the lives of Mujahideen on the Pakistan and Afghanistan border. It is, in fact, hard to identify where Vollmann belongs in his own story; is he a fiction writer or a journalist? Is his work nonfiction?

Does it create a new genre of a nonfictional novel? And that question applies to Alexievich, too, as her genre and style of writing are also bordering on journalism and literature. Svetlana Alexievich's book gives us the perspective of Soviet soldiers and their families – the stories that were silenced by Moscow. The conflict took the lives of people from all Soviet Republics. All of that is presented in a kaleidoscopic narrative compiled from the author's interviews with different people.

Vollmann and Alexievich are representative of their cultural heritage, American and Soviet writers and journalists. Vollmann was a young writer, and by the time of writing *An Afghanistan Picture Show*, he was not a significant figure. He is a part of the new American writers of Generation X, the revolutionaries of American fiction writing in a way. Initially, he tried his way in academia, but it did not work out. His writing comes from a very different background compared to Alexievich's. Svetlana Alexievich is a Soviet Belarusian writer who started her career as a journalist. Her writing originated from Soviet writers and journalists, like Bunin and Bykov. Analysis of differences in the nature of two writers' books in terms of genre and style brings a new perspective on the records of history in literature. So, what are the genres? What are the similarities and differences in the works of authors covering the war from different sides of the conflict?

This thesis consists of three main chapters. The first chapter recounts the history of the Soviet-Afghan war and important dates and details related to Vollmann and/or Alexievich's narratives. It gives a short summary of pre-invasion Afghanistan, the invasion, wartime Afghanistan and the outcome of the war for the Soviet and Afghan sides. After the general history part, I analyse the lack of accessible information about the war. The second chapter of the paper is devoted to Vollmann and to the description and analysis of his book. There are more biographical details about him, and later, a textual analysis of his work with archival

materials. The third chapter is about Svetlana Alexievich, including a biographical entry and a textual analysis of her book.

Overall, there is no way to capture the whole scope of the war and organise it chronologically. If there are things that are not mentioned or shown through historical records, they will be kept in literature. Having more data for analysis is better with no need to specify the genre, style or any other aspect of the delivered information. After all, that's always up to an individual's perspective to decide what matters and what does not. This thesis's main research question is how literature contributes to the study of history. There are gaps that literature can cover to supplement the field of historical scholarship.

History

The Soviet-Afghan War

The period from 1945 to 1989 was the Cold War, a conflict between two great powers, the US and the USSR, through non-military as well as indirect (proxy) military combat on a large scale (Hammond 2006, 5). In the US, all the media was used to propagate “the notion of Soviet communism as ‘a spreading disease’, as a godless, murderous tyranny governed by ‘vicious torturers who enjoy inflicting pain and murdering children’, worked to vindicate political strategies, from the increase of defence budgets and Third World interventionism, to the intensified regulation of the domestic population” (Hammond 2006, 5). While for the USSR, the US and capitalist Europe were corrupt, unjust, expansionist and anti-communist states (Hammond 2006, 6). Two sides of the world, East and West, were demonising each other through the Iron Curtain. US president Jimmy Carter boycotted the 1980 Moscow Olympic Games as a reaction to the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan (McVicker 2019, 48-51). Later during the war, US President Ronald Reagan was supporting Pakistan and the Islamic military groups of Afghanistan (Saikal 2004, 199). CIA agents were in close contact with the Mujahideen groups, coordinating action and providing arms.

Afghanistan was not centralised, as previous attempts at different forms of monarchic and republican rule did not work beyond the urban areas for elites. Prince Daoud was the leader of the country from 1973; he could not establish his control over the whole country. A British historian, Mark Galeotti, claims that Daoud “wanted to see Afghanistan with a literate population, sexual equality, factories and all the other trappings of a modern state” (1995, 4). People started to rebel when they realised none of the above measures had been accomplished. But Daoud’s rule was useful for Soviet rulers to impose their policies. The People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), an Afghan communist party operational since the mid-1960s, radicalised in 1978 and launched a coup, seizing power and installing Nur Mohammed Taraki

as Chairman of the Revolutionary Council, and Hafizullah Amin as his Prime Minister (Galeotti, 1995, 4). The KGB tried to counsel Taraki on his decisions, but Taraki was very active and made each of his actions immediate, which resulted in a total breakdown of the social order and violent response from the population, but in Taraki's eyes, it held him in power. Otherwise, the Prime Minister could take over the power and become the new leader of the country (Galeotti 1995, 6).

By March 1979, the power division in the country changed as half of the army followed Amin's rule and joined the rebels. The Taraki regime's followers began asking for military support from Moscow. On July 8th, the Soviet government sent "a battalion from the 105th Guards Airborne Division" (Galeotti 1995, 7) to the air force base undercover. The aim of the sent battalion was to prepare for the invasion of the Soviet army or evacuation from Afghanistan. KGB agents in the country argued whether they should retreat or continue supporting Taraki's regime for later Soviet Union advancement in the region (Galeotti 1995, 8). In September 1979, Taraki was assassinated by Amin's group. After that, Taraki's followers assisted the KGB in avenging Taraki, and KGB agents Ivanov and Puzanov supported all actions against Amin (Galeotti 1995, 9).

In early December of 1979, the Soviet Union started their preparations for the military intervention into Afghanistan (Galeotti 1995, 10). General Secretary Communist Party of Soviet Union, Leonid Brezhnev, and Politburo members, Mikhail Suslov, Dmitry Ustinov, Yuri Andropov and Andrei Gromyko, arranged a meeting and listed reasons for the invasion into Afghanistan: expansion towards the lands rich in oil; protection of the USSR from the effect of the collapse of allied countries; fear of the US, as Amin was in contact with CIA; fundamentalism, as to restrain the development of Islam in Central Asian countries (yet, no Islam related policies or issues were given to political officers); help Afghan communists take

over the power (yet that was just a misleading information from the local officers) (Galeotti 1995, 11-12). Officially, Soviet troops entered Afghanistan territory to stop the civil war and increase the Soviet influence in the region (Ackermann and Galbas 2015, 4). There was no command for soldiers to attack or get involved in military actions.

The Soviet Army crossed the Afghan border on December 25th, reaching Herat, then Shindand, Farah and Kandahar. By December 26th, they had already arrived in Kabul. December 27th, the Soviet Army in Kabul reached 5000 soldiers. The next day, Amin was assassinated, and the Soviet army started a war on January 7th 1980. By the end of the month, Soviet troops reached 50 thousand soldiers and 80 thousand by the end of the summer (Galeotti 1995, 13-15). Many of the soldiers arrived in Afghanistan without knowing what kind of battlefield they had entered (Ackermann and Galbas 2015, 10). Soviet troops did not prepare adequate tactics to respond to the Afghan guerrilla fights (Ro'i 2022, 26).

The Soviet army did not recruit soldiers directly to Afghanistan. Preparation of soldiers started in school, as the government introduced “lessons of civil defense (*grazhdanskaia oborona*)” in ninth and tenth grades (McVicker 2019, 42-43). Lessons took 2 hours each week. That was done because of the secrecy of the war in the media. Most of the pupils chose a civilian lifestyle, as the patriotic feeling after WWII was decreasing. The number of soldiers they could recruit dropped significantly during the Afghan war (McVicker 2019, 42). Meaning that most of the people in the Soviet army were not professional soldiers at all but poorly trained teenagers recruited recently to serve a temporary term in the army. Afghanistan and their guerilla tactics were new to the Soviet army. Soviet troops did not prepare adequate tactics to respond to the Afghan guerrilla fights (Ro'i 2022, 26). Many soldiers died or were injured in the early stages of the war due to the poor preparation of their commanders.

Even if there were many deaths, all the deaths of soldiers were kept secret in the first years of the war. And the cause of their death was fabricated to mean “they had died in ‘a non-combat vehicular accident’ in a training exercise” (McVicker 2019, 46). So, that did not reveal the truth of war. Zinc coffins arriving from Afghanistan were sealed. Relatives of the soldiers could not see their bodies, and some of them may not even have been the correct bodies, or they may have been so deformed that there would be no way to identify them. But still, there was no official reporting of casualties of war from the Soviet army to the civilian population (Ackermann and Galbas 2015, 8). One of the main sources that later brought it to the public was Svetlana Alexievich’s *Boys in Zinc*. Her book title is directly related to zinc coffins in which soldiers from Afghanistan were buried.

The Soviet army did have battles, but no significant military success during the first years of the war. Whenever the media mentioned Afghanistan during the Brezhnev era, “there was no fighting: happy soldiers were distributing bread and medicines to a grateful Afghan populace” (Galeotti 1995, 142). After Brezhnev, Andropov, from 1982 to 1984, was negotiating a withdrawal from Afghanistan (Galeotti 1995, 16). That shows that continuing the war was not in the interests of the state government. But Andropov did not succeed. Later, Chernenko, who ruled the Soviet Union from 1984 to 1985, was the one who wanted to achieve a military victory in Afghanistan (Galeotti 1995, 17-18). But the Soviet media did not report on casualties in Afghanistan till *glasnost*’ in the late 1980s (McVicker 2019, 3). The USSR did not want to commemorate or acknowledge all the dead soldiers in the Afghan War (McVicker 2019, 91). Things changed in 1985. During *glasnost*’ most of the casualties mentioned were individual heroic actions of soldiers (Bradsher 1999, 242-243). But even then, some of the information was kept from the public. One of the examples is not translating the end of the interview of US Secretary of State, George P. Schulz, in 1987, when he said that Afghans don’t want Soviet soldiers’ help (Bradsher 1999, 245). So, no external information nor any

information not approved by Moscow would appear in the media. Soviet soldiers in guerrilla attacks or any other military actions were not mentioned; they were described as being on “international duty”, not engaged in combat. Gorbachev started the withdrawal of the Soviet army from Afghanistan in 1986, as a goodwill gesture after the Geneva talks (Galeotti 1995, 18-19). By February 1989, all Soviet troops returned to the USSR.

The multiethnic country of the Soviet Union sent soldiers from all Soviet republics. Some of the people were claiming that their ethnicity or group was the main force of the war, to take credit for certain successes on the battlefield (Galeotti 1995, 25-26). Most of the soldiers, according to the statistics of death, were Russian and Ukrainian, 6 879 and 2 374 out of the total 13 833 deaths (Galeotti 1995, 28). Yet, most of the historical sources call them Russians. Most of the soldiers came from Slavic cities such as Dnepropetrovsk, Arkhangelsk, Lyubertsy and Tula (Galeotti 1995, 30). They were all from the working class, as the wealthier citizens just bought their freedom from the *voenkomat* (the local drafting institution), and some even created a whole list of people exempted from military service draft (Galeotti 1995, 29). So, the war was escapable; not everyone had to participate. In reality, there was less than one per cent of the Soviet population involved in the Soviet-Afghan war (Galeotti 1995, 30). That is probably one of the reasons why the information about the war was not spread, and government-controlled media overpowered the voices of veterans.

There were many problems for soldiers, on and off the battlefield. Among the soldiers, there developed two types of relationships, *dedovshchina* (hierarchy based on rank or time spent in the warzone) and *gruppovshchina* (grouping by belonging to a certain ethnic group) (Galeotti 1995, 36-37). With a small number of soldiers and constant casualties, some of the soldiers were always higher in hierarchy than the newcomers. Most of the soldiers were sent to Afghanistan for 18-24 months and participated in combat missions (Göransson et. al. 2024,

2). In some rare cases, the level of violence in combat was left for soldiers' individual decisions. So, the internal structure of the army was decentralised and not cooperative with one another. Soviet army troops had little communication with each other. The same is true of their commanders and the highest Soviet authorities (Kalinovsky 2011, 12-14). That resulted in the failure of coordination of the war and its ultimate end in withdrawal. The worst-positioned group were female soldiers. Soviet female soldiers in Afghanistan were raped by male soldiers (Galeotti 1995, 41). That is one of the main crimes among Soviet soldiers, of whom 11.8 per cent were found to be rapists. The first one being hooliganism, which includes 12.6 per cent of soldiers involved in it (Galeotti 1995, 41). After that, female soldiers from the Afghanistan war were stigmatised as prostitutes.

The Soviet government spent billions on the war, helping Kabul transport helicopters and other weapons, while its own soldiers did not have hats, sleeping bags or sometimes even hiking boots (Bradsher 1999, 201). They had to purchase their own equipment, like running shoes. Soviet soldiers suffered from heat strokes, hepatitis, typhus, dysentery, meningitis and malaria because of the poor hygiene and medical care facilities (Ewans 2002, 225). Many soldiers consumed drugs and alcohol. Alcohol on the battlefield was limited, but soldiers had access to drugs such as hashish, LSD and heroin (Bradsher 1999, 203-204). Soldiers returned with addictions, injuries, and some became invalids. All the physical injuries were documented, while Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and other psychological conditions were overlooked (Galeotti 1995, 69).

The Soviet Afghan war was not only a military intervention but also involved exercises in soft power, backed up by Muslim religious leaders of Central Asia. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was accompanied by the SADUM (Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Central Asia), which wanted to cooperate with the Islamic society of the Democratic Republic

of Afghanistan (Tasar 2011, 213). It was meant to speed up the process of Sovietization of Afghanistan with an emphasis on the similarity of Islam and socialism. Sovietization is “a process by which Afghanistan should be made to look like the Soviet Muslim republics” through “the exportation of Soviet institutions to Afghanistan, the creation of a new generation educated by Soviet curricula, and, finally, the establishment of the monopoly of a strong Communist party” (Roy 1989, 48). Before the Soviet invasion, the population of Afghanistan was 42% Pushtu-speaking Pathans, the rest were Turkic and Iranian minorities, Tajik, Uzbek and Turkmen. Pathans were the dominant group in the region due to their numbers and connections with neighbouring Pakistani Pathans. Turkic and Tajik groups had connections with the ethnic groups from the Soviet Union. Yet, most of the population shared Sunni Islam (Galeotti 1995, 3). The participation of SADUM was not initially planned; it was involved only in the 1980s after the invasion in 1979 (Tasar 2011, 215). But SADUM became an active element of Soviet influence in Afghanistan. A model for the church–state relationship was proposed by the SADUM to regulate the Central Asian part of the Soviet Union (Tasar 2001, 217). There were three main missions for SADUM. Firstly, the mission of SADUM was to show the compatibility of Islamic religious laws and a communist regime. Secondly, to invite Afghan religious leaders and persuade them to support communist rule. Thirdly, constantly send religious advisers to Kabul for Soviet and Afghan muftiates. “Like SADUM, this Afghan muftiate and its staff were meant to embody a modern Islam, compatible with the requirements of progress and, of necessity, Socialism. Because much of the relevant documentation remains classified, many questions concerning SADUM’s activities must go unanswered for now” (Tasar 2011, 221). So, many of the actions taken by SADUM or ordered by Moscow officials are not available. That shows how the Soviet government implemented not only direct combat or hard power in the conflict, but also soft power through the religion of the local region.

One of the powers that opposed the Soviet army was the Mujahideen. Mujahideen are a group of Muslim combatants (Ewans 2002, 213). Some of them were Islamists who wanted to rule the state according to the religious laws and traditionalists who wanted to liberate the state. The number of Mujahideen soldiers was around 45 thousand from 1981 to 1983. By 1986, they reached 150 thousand people (Bradsher 1999, 207). The main 7 groups of Mujahideen were based in Peshawar and were supported by General-President Muhammad Zia ul-Haq, who ruled Pakistan from 1977 to 1988 (Long 2015, 601). There were seven major groups of Mujahideen in Peshawar: Hekmatyar, Rabbani, Khales, Sayyaf, Mohammadi, Mojaddedi, and Gilani (Bradsher 1999, 184-189). US President Ronald Reagan supported the Mujahideen and Pakistan through CIA agents, but much of the money and arms provided by the USA to Pakistan were wasted due to corruption (Bradsher 1999, 220-221). Only one-third or half of the aid reached the Mujahideens. Corruption could occur at the level of the Pakistani military or local Mujahideen leaders in Peshawar. Previously, US aid to Pakistan was stopped with the inauguration of President Carter in 1977 (Kalinovsky 2011, 6). Carter criticised Zia and Pakistan's nuclear program. Interestingly, non-Muslim soldiers were not welcomed. Some of the European soldiers of fortune went to Peshawar and were not recruited by the Mujahideen (Bradsher 1999, 207). Mujahideen asked only for arms and money, neglecting any attempt of non-Muslim soldiers to enter the war on their side.

The result of a decade-long war is horrendous. Millions of Afghans were murdered, 4 million fled to Pakistan and Iran, and others were displaced inside the country (Barfield 2010, 234). Soviet soldiers experienced a lot of illnesses and struggles. But the government only cared for the combat losses, so the local population's loss was only collateral damage. This led to the final number of soldiers' deaths acknowledged by the Soviet Union to be 15,051 (Baev 2015, 122; Barfield 210, 238). According to Martin Ewans, initially, the Soviet Government tried to control the Afghanistan conflict through the KGB (2002, 197). Eventually, they had to

get into combat because of the loss of control over Afghanistan that they intended to make Socialist (Martin 2002, 197). After the USSR's withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, the Taliban became a major influence in the state (Ackermann and Galbas 2015, 6).

The experience of Afghan veterans returning home varied based on the time of their arrival, whether it was during the early period of war or during glasnost' and perestroika (Ro'i 2015, 20). As in the beginning of the war, they fought in a war no one talked about, and by returning, no big social backlash was applied. While for soldiers of the later period being an *afghanets* created a lot of troubles, seen as a murderer and rapist (Ro'i 2015, 24-26). They did not have a wide range of options after the war and were left to reintegrate into society themselves. There was no recognition of the Soviet-Afghan war veterans till the collapse of the Soviet Union. And even after that, in the Russian Federation, the official recognition as a veteran and pensions were granted only in 1995 (Ackermann and Galbas 2015, 11). Yet, the benefits for Afghanistan veterans are less than for WWII veterans. To gain a better living and receive more support, many Afghan veterans cooperated with the government and had to form a group of Afghan veterans for political propaganda during Vladimir Putin's presidency. Ukrainian veterans received no better treatment, and they only got recognition after assisting the Maidan protests against Yanukovich. In Baltic states, like Lithuania, Afghan veterans are recognised as victims of totalitarian rule (Ackermann and Galbas 2015, 12). In the collective memory, "to this day, the last Soviet war remains in the shadow of the Great Patriotic War" because there was no win for the USSR, and the military actions affected a very small amount of the population of the USSR (Ackermann and Galbas 2015, 14). Yet, the war affected the Soviet Union as a whole. The war was a sign for other countries under the Soviet regime that breaking free was possible, as the Soviet army had withdrawn from Afghanistan, making it one of the factors for the fall of the Soviet Union (Martin 2002, 236). Another factor was the cost:

the USSR spent from 7\$ to 12\$ billion a year during the Soviet-Afghan War (Ewans 2002, 223).

Information Gap

The information about the war is limited. Access to documents in the Soviet archives is restricted or kept secret. In the 1980s, scholars did not have a chance to see those documents and analyse the decision-making process of the Soviet government. The access to the archival materials after the war revealed the opposite view from the scholarship written when the war was ongoing, which “generally cast the Soviet Union as an expansionist power that operated according to the Brezhnev doctrine” (McVicker 2019, 5-6). “The manipulation of language and imagery in the public sphere was a major cause of the scepticism that many view as a defining feature of Cold War culture” (Hammond 2006, 6). Both the US and USSR were producing false information about each other. And that’s why most of the official sources are not faithful or even completely false. Due to the scarcity of information about the war, a lot of rumours about the Afghan war were spread (Galeotti 1995, 2). So, the real history had to be unveiled from those mysteries and analysed only after the fact. One example of Soviet propaganda and news fabrication is Robert Lee. He was a hitchhiker caught in Afghanistan. The only reason he was caught was for the sake of portraying him as a CIA agent, a spy for Soviet Media (McVicker 2019, 39). Vollmann could have been caught the same way if he had crossed the border, and his story would never have been shared.

War veterans wanted to share their stories of what the war actually looked like. But due to their small numbers, their voices were suppressed by the state propaganda (Galeotti 1995, 31). “The official line under Gorbachev was more interesting, and it provides an effective case-study of the evolution of glasnost'...This was part of the early bid to use the media to pressure the local bureaucracy to tackle local issues and also to bypass the clogged and distorting official information channels upon which the leadership had relied” (Galeotti 1995, 142). Gorbachev asked to save the data and remember all the soldiers, so no one would be left forgotten. Svetlana

Alexievich's book can be a direct answer to Gorbachev's demand, as her entries in the book start from 1986 (Myers 2017, 332; Alexievich 2017, 10). The topic of the Afghan war was abused by the new political leaders to build up their reputation on it, or by the aspiring journalists who wrote populist newspaper articles (Galeotti 1995, 20). And because public interest was high and the amount of info was so low, speculations were always spread (McVicker 2019, 108). The information about real war was hard to find if you had not known any *afgantsy*. The access to real stories was brought only by Svetlana Alexievich in 1989 with the publication of *Boys in Zinc*. Previously, most of the narrative was about politics and that ignorance of ordinary people "underscores the need for a greater focus on oral history to provide an alternative perspective" (McVicker 2019, 10). That still stays true today, because many historians or other scholars use Alexievich's work as their source of real people's stories or commentary. For example, all the interviews and the experience of people in Galeotti's book, which was cited several times in this paper, are taken from Alexievich's book (1995, 44). Another scholarly work by McVicker also cites Alexievich. While some of the interviews are his own, he still had to use Svetlana Alexievich's interviews (McVicker 2019, 100). That shows the need for the representation of the real picture, not only from the point of view of officials and people in charge, but also from the ordinary people whose voices are usually quiet. That is a gap covered by Oral History and other forms of personal non-fiction texts or records that can talk more about the position of a single person. So, Svetlana Alexievich's work covers personal and subjective experiences of the Soviet-Afghan War.

When it comes to non-Soviet and Anglophone non-fiction sources, there is "Ellen Jones' overview of the Soviet military press, a starting point for understanding the social composition of the Soviet Army in 1985 and young recruits' opinions toward mandatory service... Jonathan Steele, whose part-memoir and part-rebuttal of Cold War myths, *Ghosts of Afghanistan*, is also a work of fine quality" (McVicker 2019, 7). In this paper, I provide one

more, William T Vollmann's *An Afghanistan Picture Show*, which gives us a view of the Mujahideen's side, of course mediated by the outsider, dating back to the early period of the war. As we understand from the previous scholarship, the earliest period of the war has the least information.

It is hard to come to a consensus on one single interpretation of events. For example, one of the scholars says, "I reject the view of contemporary Sovietologists who saw the war as a means of permanently extending Soviet influence and of making Afghanistan a Soviet republic in all but name" (Kalinovsky 2011, 12). Looking at this, we can assume that Kalinovsky is giving an interpretation of his view on events after studying documents and other historians' works. When it comes to the Kazakhstani books on Afghanistan, it does not significantly differ from other sources. Unlike some other sources, a Kazakh scholar contends that the aim of the Soviet army was to continue conquering Central Asia as they intended in the beginning of the 20th century (Akimbekov 2020, 317). That opinion is backed up by Svetlana Alexievich's epigraph shown at the beginning of the book. What is hard to deny is that it is still an interpretation of the event given with an artificial narrative positioned by the point of view of an individual observer. "In the process of studying a given complex of events, he begins to perceive the possible story form that such events may figure" (White 1978, 86). Hayden White's theory in this case perfectly describes the incapability of the History scholarship to develop a single true story. As it is one of the interpretations of the event. Kalinovsky rejects other interpretations, which are based on rumours, personal opinions or official documents from the archive.

If historians cannot cover some of the aspects of classified periods of the Soviet-Afghan war, what are the sources to cover gaps or at least have a wider view? Can it be fiction or non-fiction literature? What is fact and fiction is a long-standing discussion among scholars. In the

course of the current global development of media resources, it is important to cover the ways in which media and any other discourse are factual or fictional. The reason is that both history and literature aim to portray a realistic image of the world. History is based only on a collection of facts that are brought together but do not complete a picture of reality, while literature is also uses 'real' elements of the world to portray the author's vision of the world. According to Hayden White, in their motivation and origin, both types of sources are mimetic, which means they are trying to imitate life (1978, 122). But their difference is the form of discourse they take in the representation of reality. In the previous centuries, people mistakenly divided history and literature, especially novels, into 'actual' reality and 'imagined' reality. White criticises historians who believed in the 'objectivity' of historical books. Those historians used to justify the different portrayals of the same events to the lack of data and the wrongness of historical information. Ultimately, they believed that history would become like natural science, have one exact answer on each specific question, and use only facts that would be inevitably objective and absolute for any discourse (White 1978, 125). White thought differently and argued back in 1978 that even if there are facts, they cannot be represented by their existence; there is always a mediator, usually a historian, for information such as historical facts to go through. As one of the obstacles, White describes language and linguistic approaches in historical and literary fields as a difference in their discourse (1978, 127-128). Historians write plain text with no poetic language in it to prevent potential misconceptions. On the other hand, writers of fiction cover more of the history of language, aesthetics and morality of the 'real' life than historians do in their works. Finally, White concludes that historians must focus not on the facts of history and their explanation but rather on the different discourses of explanation of facts in history (White 1978, 134). Meaning that if facts are not available to determine or if there are different explanations, then a historian, who is a narratively present figure in his works, should find all the possible ways to know why and how those facts in history were

perceived. Otherwise, focusing only on one explanation or fact, the history again becomes a simplification of history and a fictionalisation of 'real' life.

But the two books that are analysed in this thesis are marketed as non-fiction. Does their genre change things? Genre is not a solid concept, and its borders are always to be defined. Antoine Compagnon, a literary theorist, argues that genre is created after the work is perceived, and how the work is perceived dictates to society how to specify the genre of the work (2004, 116-117). It is not only the author who accesses the genre and expects it to be that way, but also the reader who later creates a more specific definition of the book's genre. Genres are not solid; they are developing and transforming, becoming more complex. So, the genre of any art is affected by both the audience perception and the way the author (novelist or scholar) manipulates the audience through certain elements (narrator's entries or data charts). So, throughout time, there will be new "genres" that make things more niche or mix previously unconnected "genres". In Vollmann and Alexievich, that is the case, as two of them are writing in a non-traditional genre.

Of course, all the things Vollmann and Alexievich could share are not exactly the same as those of scholars. There is no additional or different view on political leaders like Brezhnev or Gorbachev. There are no different facts, dates or any quantitative data to widen the view on the issue of the Soviet-Afghan war. But Vollmann and Alexievich are bringing a new side of the war into perspective, the lives of ordinary people. War did not only happen on the battlefield, but it also affected the lives of many people back home. It's left a long-lasting effect on their lives. Without Vollmann and Alexievich, that part of history would be left in the past with no way to recover that knowledge. So, documentary literature can bring to light many under-researched sides of war.

William T Vollmann

Background Information

William T. Vollmann is a journalist, historian, novelist, war correspondent, short-story writer, essayist, photographer, painter and activist. He is a National Book Award winner for *Europe Central* (2005) and honouree of the National Book Critics Circle, PEN USA and the Whiting Foundation (Pierleoni 2018). There was a belief that at some point, he would receive a Nobel Prize (Johnson 2025).

William Tanner Vollmann was born on July 28th, 1959, in California, US. Vollmann comes from the family of Professor Dr Thomas Vollmann (Johnson 2025). From a very young age, William was a science fiction fan, and two of his favourite writers were Philip K. Dick¹ and James Blish². Science fiction was the first genre in which Vollmann wrote, for example, a story about astronauts. His sister Julie drowned in 1968, when he was only 8. Parents left him to look after her; that is the reason he blames himself for her death. That incident became one of the big traumas in his life. It affected his later writings, as some of the characters felt guilt for lives they couldn't save (Hemmingson 2004, 7).

In 1977, he started studying at Deep Springs College, where he started an autobiographical novel titled *Introduction to the Memoir*. Later, that manuscript transformed into *An Afghanistan Picture Show*. During his college years, he got interested in the work of Danilo Kiš, *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* (Hemmingson 2004, 8), a book that tries to capture every detail to gain its credibility and trust from the reader (Juraga and Booker 1993, 44). It's possible that this was another important influence on his life and later writing, which normally

¹ Philip K Dick (1928-1982) was a science fiction writer. His works centred on the idea that “distinguishing between waking reality and visions proves to be impossible” (Lem & Abernathy 59).

² James Blish (1921-1975) was a science fiction writer, mostly overlooked since there were other more popular writers. His works connect the science fiction with religious issues (Ketterer 243)

engages a massive number of references and paragraphs of footnotes or direct copying and pasting of the referred document. John K Cox suggested that Vollmann's and Kiš's styles are very similar in being maximalist, and their thematic interest in writing is very closely related to each other (2016, 45).

Maximalist writers tend to write long encyclopaedic books and maximise every aspect of narrative (Ercolino 2012, 241-242). Kiš wrote more on the issue of World War II and the history of other political events and conflicts. The same pattern can be seen in Vollmann, who flies around the world looking for historical and political events/issues to write books about (Cox 2016, 45). That can mean Vollmann was in a way acquiring his writing style and interests from Kiš during his college years.

He continued his studies at Cornell University and graduated in 1981 with a bachelor's degree. A year later, he did not finish his graduate program, as he went to Pakistan. He came back from Pakistan in 1982. Later, in 1984, he became a Silicon Valley programmer for a while. That was his first studio, as the office was his shelter for the night and a place for writing. He spent nights there writing his first novel, *You Bright and Risen Angel* (Hemmingson 2004, 8).

You Bright and Risen Angel was a decent starting novel that made him visible to publishers and critics. Later, he wrote more: *The Rainbow Stories* (1989), *Whores for Gloria* (1991), *An Afghanistan Picture Show* (1992), *Rising Up and Down* (2003), *Europe Central* (2005), and *The Dying Grass* (2015), among others. In 2026, his 3400-page new novel, *A Table for Fortune*, is to be published (Amazon). It may be his last novel, as a few years ago, he was diagnosed with colon cancer. In the interview for the Wall Street Journal, he stated that there are 3 months or maybe 3 years for him to live healthily (Nazaryan 2025).

His works are also classified as hybrid fiction, which is a type of literature that has two different or possibly completely contradicting social ideologies (Gilbreath 2018, 2-3). The

source of such hybridity in his eyes is the developing cultural norms and technological advancement. That may be one of the reasons his books have no specific ending or idea that can be central, as it is a constant dialogue between two sides. Vollmann siding with the Mujahideen and representing the US divided him and positioned him between two sides. One is the white man from the US who came there for journalistic research, the other being a Mujahideen supporter, who is the mediator for both of the sides to have a dialogue. Taking into consideration this explanation of his identity, his trip and discoveries can be taken as a journalistic work, followed by several philosophical questions that the author does not have answers to. That dialogue of sides went unnoticed once, which resulted in Vollmann's FBI investigation, as investigators took Vollmann only as a Mujahideen side, ignoring his US side (Vollmann 2013). Vollmann contacted the CIA after his arrival and was questioned by agent Nick, as he writes in the note from 1983. "Upon his return to San Francisco, the Young Man called the C.I.A. as he was requested to do" (Vollmann 1992, 60). After Vollman's return from Afghanistan, the FBI suspected him of terrorism. They constantly checked up on him to identify if he was a loyal US citizen or a spy. In the article "Life as a Terrorist", published in Harper's magazine, Vollmann is speaking of his side of the issue. In the article, he provides some of the official FBI documentation of his interaction with him and his activity. They capture the earliest dates of interaction as 1990. Later interactions became regular from 2002. But we cannot define if there was an earlier file on Vollmann from 1982, right after his return from Afghanistan. The call mentioned in the book is way earlier than the FBI files, dating from 1990. That means there is a chance to find something in the FBI archive because some of the lines are still censored and cannot be disclosed, meaning some of the files could still be classified.

In a *Harper's* article about that experience, Vollmann reports the trial against the FBI regarding his writings and their invasion of his privacy and his books. The final result is that 785 pages of his works were reviewed, and only 294 of them were released, meaning that a lot

of information was lost and prohibited from publication (Vollmann, 2013). It is possible that his style of writing was also affected by such censorship. When it comes to *An Afghanistan Picture Show*, there was no involvement in censorship or prohibitions of publication from the FBI or CIA. According to the documents from the OSU archive, finishing the manuscript was planned no earlier than 1987 (SPEC.CMS.98, Box 21, Folder 73). And publishing took only a couple of years. Most of the rejection letters found are from 1991 to 1992, when it was accepted for publication. That trial went years later in 2011, long after the publication of *An Afghanistan Picture Show: or How I Saved the World*.

Being an author and journalist who writes hybrid prose (i.e. a mixture of fact and fiction) on unpopular topics, his message is not very clear to many readers. Interestingly, there are central themes common to all his works: freedom, redemption, and prostitution (Hemmingson 2004, 11). Those are not niche topics, but I believe they can be considered niche with a location that Vollmann takes as a basis for his works. The main focus of his writings is also the problem of his popularity. According to Grassian, Vollmann focused on a very small, specific part of American society (2002, 27). That can be proved by the group of Vollmann fanbase from Reddit, where most of the critique is the length, being too specific and having a boring ending³.

Finding himself in the world and in the literary and journalistic circles was always an unclear thing for Vollmann and scholars. It is, in fact, hard to identify where Vollmann belongs; is he a writer or a journalist, or does it make his works nonfiction? Does it create a new genre of nonfictional historical novel? Vollmann is one of the writers that Grassian fits into the general list of Generation X American fiction writers (Grassian 2002, iii). Overall, William T. Vollmann was usually listed with David Foster Wallace, Richard Powers, Saul Bellow, John

³ <https://www.reddit.com/r/vollmann/>

Updike, Thomas Pynchon and other writers (Grassian 2002; Staes 2013; Thompson 2007). That is a list of popular US writers from the end of the 20th century, and Vollmann, starting his career in the 1980's, is surely a member of that "club". But it is not true from his own perspective, as his view of contemporary writers is drastically different: he expands his contemporary literature to the last two hundred years. In Vollmann's own opinion, contemporary writers are Hawthorne, Faulkner, Poe, Nabokov, Melville, Proust, Zola, Mishima, Kawabata, Tolstoy, and others. The whole long list of his "contemporaries" can be found in the edited collection of his work *Expelled from Eden* (2004). The only work he could not include in the list, as it was less "contemporary", is *The Tale of Genji* by Murasaki Shikibu (Vollman 2004, 37). Surprisingly, Vollmann "consciously avoided" contemporary literature, finding contemporaries in people from two centuries back, while ignoring the authors around him can lead to a different type of identity crisis.

Writing Style

Vollmann's writing begins with an enormous research of the subject he is going to observe for the book (Gilbreath 2018, 37-38). He researches as much as he can and then gives all the necessary information with every detail. It can be a photo, a drawing, a webpage or a typed copy of a letter, and any other possible fact. Vollmann does not like to stop while writing; his work seems endless, and that is one of the ideas he kept while writing (Hemmingson 2004, 10). Hemmingson, one of the early Vollmann scholars, says that Vollmann's books do not have conventional endings. They might stop, but the reader will be looking for more words, feeling that there is more to come, provoking readers' interest. Vollmann's alterations between the first and third points of view are pointed out as something that is very common and is done with ease. That might be describing the duality of his writing, when he changes from narrator to character and back, creating a contrasting situation. "Vollmann crosses the bridge from the observer to the participant, transforming himself from the outsider looking in to the true outsider" (Corcoran 2016, 17). I think that is the best description of the difference that Vollmann makes. Being not just engaging but being engaged in the actions of his own writings by experiencing things, not by only reading about them. There is, in a sense, no "fiction" or lie in his books, as Heather Corcoran remarks, Vollmann does things he writes about. It is extremely hard to define what kind of "academic, the anthropologist, or even the journalist" he is with such a mix of genres (2016, 17). It is a literary prose that has stories of real people, which is reported in an academic or journalistic manner. Yet, it does have access to a character's subjective thoughts and emotions, which makes it a more fictional piece according to Genette (1993, 65-68). George Bauer, on the other hand, favours the idea of Vollmann being on the same level as both academics and journalists in his "participatory research", as he is taking getting into the society that he's interested in as close as possible to, and even "hangs out" to be closer (2016, 28). But there is a significant detail that might be affecting Vollmann's work:

an outsider position, that of a person who does not have enough camouflage to make him even remotely look like a local citizen.

“It is a mixture of genres: journalism, essays, short stories, meditations, and prose poems, a compilation of his experiences travelling the world as a war correspondent and reporter of the exotic — an ideal subject for the Hemingway Award” (Hemmingson 2004, 9). In this excerpt, Hemmingson gives a short description of Vollmann’s writings. Vollmann writes long pieces and paragraphs or pages-long sentences. Many of his works are written with a switching 1st and 3rd person point of view narrator. His well-structured and argumentative background information might lead to the idea that Vollmann is seeking a final answer to everything. But there are no conventional endings to his works.

The only notion of finale or ending of *An Afghanistan Picture Show* can be found in his early manuscript held in the Ohio State University Archive. That manuscript has a last chapter, titled “Conclusions”, where Vollmann has a summary of his trip (Box 12, Folder 43). After the analysis, it’s clear that the section has no difference from the published book, but has lost the original title. Taking out the marker of conclusion from the book moves the reader from a sense of the end. The main focus of his writings is also the problem of his popularity. According to Grassian, the low popularity of Vollmann is a result of his books being focused on a very small, specific part of American society (2002, 27). After all, that can also be his strength, yet summarising the opinions of Vollmann’s fanbase from Reddit, most critiques of his works are about their length, being too specific and having a boring ending⁴.

It is hard to identify the genre of *An Afghanistan Picture Show*, considering its obscure style. It is most apparently a journalistic work, which has a lot of interviews and some sort of documentation. Vollmann records and transcribes tapes of his interviews with locals in

⁴ <https://www.reddit.com/r/vollmann/>

Pakistan and later makes it into a narrative from their point of view or a dialogue (Interview transcripts). In this sense, it is a journalistic work. On the other hand, having lots of references, transcribed interviews, preliminary research that he did, and conversations with scholars can classify his work more like a scholarly work, only written in an unconventional style. But what if most of the things he heard from the locals and translated were simply not worth writing about, or even fabricated to some extent? That would make the whole book an autofiction piece, which opens a new identification marker for Vollmann to be associated with.

The genre identity problem is actually what sets Vollmann apart from the list of contemporary writers provided by Grassian. Grassian points out the two main differences of Vollmann: again, one is the amount of exploration before writing, and the second is the focus of his writings (2002, 27). Focusing on the global conflicts or other political and ecological issues of the world and producing borderline fictional and nonfictional books really makes it hard to place Vollmann among writers or journalists. And this borderline identity can make his works something that is neither fiction nor nonfiction, a hybrid like autofiction. Autofiction works combine fiction and autobiographical genres (Worthington 2018). The genre of Vollmann's book is hard to specify, but such ambiguous pieces resisting conventional generic and linear narrative structures end up capturing the experience that historiography tends to leave out, and are particularly useful for accounting for such wildly insane experiences as the Soviet-Afghan war.

An Afghanistan Picture Show

The first draft of the book was written in 1982, and there are a few other manuscript drafts written till 1992, when it was finally published. There is a chronological development among the manuscripts stored at the Ohio State University. The earliest one is the notebook handwritten while Vollmann was in Pakistan (Notebook). It was written in 1982 and has almost all the content that went into the final published version. The next manuscript was written somewhere before 1987, as it does not have comments and passages from 1987 and later (Manuscript, 1982 - 1986). And the last two are almost identical to the published version. What makes them useful for the project are comments from the editor and Vollmann (Manuscript, 1992). With all the manuscripts, we can trace the changes in chapter titles and structuring. Also, there are some additional paragraphs or small sections that appeared later when he was rethinking the trip and all the things that happened.

The Notebook, the earliest draft of the book, was written like a diary with day-by-day entries from Vollmann. Yet, the structure of the book is very much close to the final published one. The main difference was the use of the first person and no Young Man in the text. My hypothesis is that it was a later addition from Vollmann. Finding that there was no 3rd-person detachment from himself in his first writings from Afghanistan gives us a stronger basis for the analysis of the narrator, author and character relationship. By this, I mean that the distinction between the past and present self makes more sense at this point, when the third-person “Young Man” emancipates from the first-person character narrator.

Manuscripts are developed in 4 stages, so to speak. The initial handwritten notebook is a diary. It was done in 1982. Later, we have a manuscript which was typed between 1983 and 1987, as it does not have notes dated 1987. The next manuscript was written in 1987 or later, as it has most of the notes from 1987. The last manuscript is the one that is the closest to the published version, or even identical to it, as it was one of the last drafts, with editor Esther

Withby's comments on the sides of the page, meaning that Vollmann did not abandon the book from 1982 and had been working on it constantly till the publication. We have a huge problem, though, understanding if there was even a reason for such a detachment from his past self. Could Vollmann really detach from his past self, if he never really was away from his consciousness and his written work?

In one of the letters Vollmann reports to his editor, Esther Whitby (no date), that he is working on another novel and has no chance to work on *An Afghanistan Picture Show*. According to Vollmann's letter, he planned to finish his manuscript by 1987 or 1988 (Letter to Esther Whitby), that is, 5 years after the first draft. All rejection letters from publishers were only from 1989 to 1991 (Letter from Andre Deutch Ltd; Letter from Farrar, Straus & Giroux, INC.). It took him only a couple of years to get published. Most of the letters with rejection considered Vollmann's work to be "fictions" with no explanation (Letter from Martin Fletcher), and yet the main problem in publishing it was marketing and sales (Letter from Andre Deutch Ltd). Another problem with his writings was that it began to slow down sometimes, while it should have moved forward, in an editor's opinion (Letter to Arnold Goodman) (SPEC.CMS.98, Box 8, Folder 31). Vollmann cannot pierce the "truth" with his wisdom, nor pretend to do it like other writers: "Sometimes their lies can even achieve a sort of truth" (Letter from Rose Kernochan). He failed to understand Afghan culture enough. The book is questionable because there are not enough lies to claim it to be understandable by the author. The two statements given by publishers seem to ignore all the work done by Vollmann and the materials he collected for the book. They treat his work as a work of fiction, which has to be marketed and sold to the audience who look for clear answers to their questions about the Afghanistan war. In response to such a critique, Vollmann does the opposite of what he is encouraged to do: he even cuts the concluding chapter out.

Right before the publication, several changes were introduced by the copy editor. Vollmann says that the copy editor did a great job but was too aggressive in repunctuation and word substitution (SPEC.CMS.98, Box 23, Folder 80). Vollmann did not change much of that because he was too lazy, and because it was a last-minute change each time. Changing things back could be problematic, as the copy editor changed a lot of things, creating new paragraphs or even changing words in direct quotations. Things were reversed to Vollmann's diction only in very important parts of the book, such as direct quotations. As it might be seen, even the writing of not only the title of the book was suggested or adjusted by the editorial group. Making us think if books are sometimes really authored by names we see on the cover page. So, now we have a text which is only slightly different from the original manuscript because of the style or genre.

Summary and description

At the beginning of the book, the audience can see the young Vollmann in the US, preparing for his trip. Vollmann is collecting information related to his travel and arguing with his father on whether it is worth it to go to Afghanistan. Next, Vollmann flies from the US to Europe, then to Pakistan. Most of his time after that is spent on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. He meets local Pakistani citizens and Afghan refugees. The two main people he interacts with are the Brigadier and General N. The Brigadier is General N.'s son, who welcomes Vollmann and introduces him to General N. General N. is presented as a figure of power, a wise man who tells the story of the current situation in Afghanistan to Vollmann. For them, he is either "AMERICA" or CIA, a man of power who can potentially help them either to finance the war or to escape to the US.

Over the course of a couple of months he gathers interviews from refugee camps of Kashgar, Hangu and Kohat. This narrative of journalistic investigation and adventure is

periodically interrupted by Vollmann's thoughts, which he has as his present, older narratorial self, adding a more retrospective view on the matter. In addition, Vollmann's narrative includes the letters he received from officials of the USSR, Pakistan, the US, and Afghanistan. The letters are inserted directly as they are. Vollmann gets sick during the travel from Pakistan to Afghanistan, crossing the border. His stomach-ache is so severe that he has to return to the US. In the end, he receives a few letters from Pakistan and sends a reply to each. His last letter is addressed to the USSR government, but he never gets a reply, assuming that everything he accused them of doing was true, so no reply is needed. The book has no clear ending, but it certainly criticises the USSR for the war. The last part of the book is the author's expression of gratitude to people who helped him before, during and after the trip.

Vollmann's style tries to buy the reader's attention and trust with extremely detailed writing. The structure of this book is tense and detailed. On the contents page (Vollmann vii), we can see that there is a preface with two chapters in it. Then there is the main part of the text, divided into three sections, each having four to five chapters with their own internal subsections. For example, here is the structure of the fourth chapter: "The Brigadier (1982)/ The Brigadier... My Clothes (1987)... The Brigadier (1982)... At Latest Report (1989)... Morning and Afternoon (1982)... Democracy...Decided Opinions... Consummation... The statement of the Afghan Brigadier... Old Nick (1983)" (Vollmann 1992, vii). That is the content of pages 41 to 62. Only 21 pages, and there are 10 subsections in the chapter. While such a detailed content plan does not make the work either more or less reliable, it can be used for the reader's convenience in some cases. The scrupulous titling of each small subsection in the book makes sense insofar as all those sections are stories happening autonomously, with their own topics and characters. They also make the work anachronic (Genette 1980, 35), letting Vollmann slip in some information from later, such as the entrances from 1987 or 1989 in the example above.

It is a narrative constantly switching between the first and third person, “I” and “Young Man”, respectively. The first entry of the main text starts with the use of third-person narration. The narrator is speaking about Vollmann the traveller as if they were different people. “It was his first hour in the country. He picked up his luggage and went to the door marked EXIT” (Vollmann 1992, 11). The book opens with a narrative about a character who is introduced but not named from the start. The reader is also likely to assume that the character could be the author himself based on the previous hints about the work being autobiographical, such as the structure or editing.

That narrative switch happens all over the book and directly affects all the aspects of the book. Firstly, it is the way for Vollmann to differentiate between his past and present, so the reader can see when different parts of the text were written. Showing a clear difference in the timeline helps to show the change of Vollmann’s opinion and shows what information was available to him in Pakistan and later. Secondly, that switch is giving a strong commentary on the challenges of capturing war experience. Narrator Vollmann is shown as a completely different person, pointing to the fact that he cannot associate with himself from the past. He has no connection to himself, as if the war were some microcosm outside of his general understanding of the world. That narrative is showing that there are things about war that scholars could not or would not cover.

Images

The cover of the book is the first thing to notice while picking it up for reading. We have no data stating whether the cover was done by Vollmann and/or other artists. As it can be seen from Figure 1, there are many details on the cover page. There is the first part of the title, *An Afghanistan Picture Show*, at the top, written in big font. Below, there is a smaller and differently colored second part, *Or, How I Saved the World*. The initial emphasis of the book

is that it proposes to show the picture of Afghanistan for the reader, but secretly, it is a story of the author. It is a personal narrative, disguised as a journalistic report or anthropological research. That was one of the influences of the editor who suggested adding a subtitle such as “An Afghanistan Picture Show: The Artist as a Young Man” or something else (Letter from Farrar, Straus & Giroux, INC., 1991). Such a direct reference to Joyce’s autobiographical novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) could hint to the reader that the book is of the same genre and/or style as Joyce’s. The reason why Vollmann refused that subtitle and came up with his own is not explained in the archival files. My theory is that he wanted a more sarcastic subtitle and also did not want to copy Joyce too much.



Figure 1.

Below the title, we can see a drawing done by the author: huge mountains with people standing on the edges looking at the reader or the author in the middle. There are ordinary people on one side and soldiers, presumably Soviet, on the other side. On the front of all that we can see a blurred self-portrait of the author, which again emphasises the idea that the book could be seen as a book about Afghanistan; in reality, it is a story about Vollmann. On the bottom right side, we can see Vollmann again, who is typing on his computer in front of the window, thinking about or looking at Afghanistan. That is again one of the ways the author shows the world out there, in real life, while his writing is happening only in a closed room somewhere in the US. That can also be interpreted as him writing the book years later, looking back on his travels and meeting Afghan people. Making it a retrospective view of his past travel to the Pakistan-Afghanistan border undermines the assumption that the story should be non-fiction. As it all happened in the past, some details could be made up due to the time difference. Yet we have archival documents proving that the writing of the main part of the book was done during the trip and in the same year. It was editing and publishing that were postponed for later due to other circumstances.

In the next section of the book, we can see the scans of Vollmann's letters and some other documents. That is proof of the factuality of the writing the author gives us before the main text begins. The reader has access to real letters with the names of real people. The use of those scans right after the cover pages emphasises that the story is autobiographical; more of those documents are available for the reader later in the book. A couple of pages later, we can see a message from the author, "this book is dedicated to all who try to help others, whether they succeed or fail" (Vollmann 1992, v). The message could be a reference to the subtitle *Or How I Saved the World*, meaning it is a story about his failure, which is ironically implied in the subtitle. And if the story is more like a failure, then the initial premise given by the author in the title of the book makes him a less reliable narrator who, whether intentionally or not, is

to confuse the reader. With that in mind, Vollmann's narrative already gives us a dual sense of fictionality and factuality. It might be a true story, but the author is ironic from the beginning, so there can come more moments where this kind of irony is used and not recognised by the reader.

The book is very rich in direct quotations from or scans of various documents. One of the key features of Vollmann's journalistic research is that he uses a lot of inserts from other sources, such as the previously mentioned letter from the Brigadier to Ronald Reagan, US president, where he asks the US for military support (Vollmann 1992, 45-47). Also, there are letters addressed to or from Vollmann. We see some of the medical documents or seals in the second half of the book. But we do not see photos again. Yet with so many materials of different origins, different media and modes of discourse, *photos* are, unexpectedly, absent from the book.

There are two main reasons why there are no photos in *An Afghanistan Picture Show*, despite what the title directly promises. Firstly, Vollmann sold most of his photos as soon as he came back. That can be seen through his conversation over mail with Lindsey Grant, a photojournalist (SPEC.CMS.98, Box 12, Folder 42). They are discussing the best way of marketing photos for sale to magazines or photo stock file houses, which implies that photos were sold, almost all of them. Secondly, there is a "revision of the revision" note that did not make it to the final version of the text, according to which the editor tried to make the book sell better and cost less money (Manuscript 1992), because having pictures in a book makes it pricier to print. To reduce costs, Vollmann has renumbered footnotes, removed obsolete letters from the alphabet, deleted the footnotes, and removed the photographs. Publishers could not afford to print photos. Also, Vollmann added "romance and intrigue, and raised the cover price" (Manuscript 1992). So, there are two reasons that there are no photos, both related to economic concerns.

Vollmann studied an article in a newspaper on how to photograph the war, as he was really preparing to make a lot of slides and photos for his documentary project. The main idea of the article is, “If your pictures are not good enough, you’re not close enough” (SPEC.CMS.98, Box 13, Folder 44). If a photographer doesn’t want to create a pornographic effect in their photo, he/she has to care for the future of their subjects. So, in this sense, Vollmann was inspired by the article to care for the people whom he photographs. The book itself shows how those interactions between him and local people happen. His ambition to help and save everyone is even shown in the subtitle of the book *How I Saved the World*, which is so ironic, as he did not save anyone but was saved by everyone around him. At the Ohio State University archive, there is an album with his photos for *An Afghanistan Picture Show*, but they are all protected by copyright, so I cannot reproduce them here. Those photos attest that Vollmann took many pictures of local people and the refugee camps. “His photographs overcome the walls of otherness and show the common humanity on either side of any artificial border or separation” (Palleau-Papin 2016, 81). With only a description of photos that can show more than words can in some cases, the book suffered a huge loss.

The only picture we receive as readers is the scan of the local Doctor’s ration book (Vollmann 198). The Doctor in question, as follows from his brother’s LinkedIn account, was later kidnapped⁵. I was able to identify him from Vollmann’s photograph using Google face-recognition technology and find his brother, Mr Ahmad-Shah Duranai. Luckily, I was able to find him by typing their family name differently from the way it was written in the book. That is one of the only real people from Afghanistan that I managed to track. Potentially, Mr Ahmad-Shah Duranai could be Vollmann’s informant from the subsection “Extreme Subtleties” (Vollmann 1992, 200).

⁵ [LinkedIn](#)

One of the main issues with identifying people from Vollmann's book is the fact that the author may have misspelt their names. Duranai wrote his brother's name as "Dr Abdul Samad Duranai", while Vollmann wrote, "Dr Abdul Sumad Durani" (Vollmann 1992, 201). That is one of the reasons other characters of Vollmann's book are so hard to locate. Also, there is little information about other people, as Vollmann either met people not in the highest position in Pakistan, which reduces their visibility, or hid their identities under nicknames or pseudonyms. General N., for example, might be Major General Shirin Dil Khan Niazi, since a letter to that person is among the Vollmann files at the OSU archive (Letter to General Niazi, SPEC.CMS.98, Box 13, Folder 47). I was lucky to find that letter, but no more information about the General anywhere else. We can trust Vollmann that he did meet some local authorities and they are real. But other than that, people from his interviews are hard to identify with the limited information and my resources.

Genre

Third-person memoirs are not an invention of Vollmann's, as the rare cases of third-person autobiography were described by Philippe Lejeune in 1980 (Genette 1991, 69-71). Right on the next page, we can see the name of the main character, "Once upon a time there was a Young Man" (Vollmann 1992, 12). And this sentence has two features that create a sense of fictionality in the text. Firstly, the name of the character is not just a name; it is the Young Man—Vollmann's repeated allusion to Joyce's novel. For a memoir that has the first-person pronoun in its subtitle (*How I Saved the World*), it is concerning: why would the author emphasise the distance between himself and the protagonist? If there is a distance between them, then can it be a true story? Secondly, Vollmann's opening is borrowed from fairy tales, "Once upon a time", which again signals a degree of fictionality of the narrative, the author's ironic removal from factuality claims. At the same time, the distance between the Young Man

and Vollmann can be psychological and refer to the naivety of Vollmann's younger self. Later on, however, "Land of the Counterpain" (Vollmann 1992, 15-25) is an entry narrated in the first person, so we can see Vollmann describing his protagonist's reasons for travelling: "I just wanted to comprehend what had happened there" (Vollmann 1992, 24). The constant changes in point of view in the book is giving a double point of reflection on events, which sometimes is shared by both Vollmann and Young Man. And sometimes it is changed, as the Vollmann narrator has his "wisdom" and a wider perspective on the issue compared to the Young Man.

Vollmann uses a lot of footnotes throughout the book. Most of the footnotes are used to show translations of words from Pushto to English or vice versa, as he uses them in the text. For example: "He ordered chicken fry with *nan** / *Nan* and *dordai* are the equivalent of pita bread. *Nan* is Pakistani; *dordai* is Afghani – very similar to *nan*, but thicker" (Vollmann 1992, 29). Here and in the next footnotes, we can see how Vollmann is describing the speciality of local culture and local language. The difference between *dordai* and *nan* cannot be specific for some observers, as some might call it just bread or some analogue of bread. That is a level of engagement with locals he achieved. While in some cases he will not provide a translation or description of some words, like in this example "...he'd grab one of these here *topaz* all cocked and loaded with *golai* swiped from some Soviet ammunition dump..." (Vollmann 1992, 14). That is one of the weaknesses of Vollmann's writing in this book, as this kind of inconsistency is breaking the trust in his words.

Vollmann's use of footnotes does not stop at local culture and translations. For him, footnotes are an essential part of the whole content of the book. Vollmann does not use footnotes only for language, but for many other types of information. One of the examples is the use of footnotes for more detailed historical data, such as the description of Peshawar population development over the years since the start of the war (Vollmann 1992, 113). On the other hand, footnotes are also for retrospective commentary, as if the narrator does not want to

interrupt the narrative flow and inserts footnotes instead. One of the examples of such a footnote is after the part about disease treatment in the region, before and after the Soviet invasion. One of the questions Vollmann strove to answer was whether the rate of diseases had grown worse or not. “But how much? That he never found out.* / At this time I thought such distinction very important because if disease in the camps was no worse than it had been at home, then I could not blame the Soviet Union for it, so it did not matter” (Vollmann 1992, 86): Vollmann does not break the narrative with a sentence from the footnote but gives a commentary from the future about the situation and explains why a certain phrase is used in the text to show how his views have changed or to prevent a potential misunderstanding.

Also, one of the footnotes is a whole letter from Carl Ring, Vice President of International Armament Corporation, to William Vollmann on page 81 about raising money in Oakland for a machine gun to send to Afghanistan. That is a situation where the consistency of using footnotes or keeping the ‘style’ is broken. Vollmann could use that letter as all the other documents, just there on the main part of the page, without putting it in a footnote. Or he might use a shorter phrase to show the result of his actions, such as, it was in another footnote: “Well, the American’s are giving a lot of food, and I think they should keep it up*/ They haven’t” (Vollmann 1992, 108). We can see how short the final result is in this case, with no other extra information provided. The second way of incorporating such a footnote is the use of Vollmann’s entrances from the future with short, sometimes one-sentence subsections. For example, the quotation of the whole section titled “At Latest Report (1989)” consists of a single sentence, “He is still waiting” (Vollmann 1992, 48). That reports the result of the letter to Ronald Reagan from the Brigadier. Footnotes in his works carry more than some additional information, but a massive part of the narrative content, providing a larger picture that the young protagonist had no access to.

Apart from the additional content, *An Afghanistan Picture Show* has a lot of detailed descriptions. Vollmann's book is a product of extensive writing. Vollmann is describing everything that happened to him on a specific day: "It was a hot morning, so hot that he became violently sick. Children were swimming in the big canal, in which, from time to time, excrement came cruising along. The women were washing their pots in that water" (Vollmann 1992, 118). In a short story, that would not be a case of extensive descriptions or details, since such descriptions are quite normal in fiction. In Vollmann's presumably historical narrative, however, that is happening all over the book, which presents the war only through such microscopic accounts of the details of some symbolic, poetic significance one expects in literary prose, where true fact (was there "excrement . . . cruising along" or is it a figment of the writer's imagination?) does not matter. The detail is expressive of the war indirectly, becoming "truer" than fact through the accuracy of how it captures the atmosphere, which directly proves the point of Hayden White and Aristotle, that art represents a more practical and real picture of history than historiography (White 2014, 8-9; Aristotle 1987, 51b1-5). Every section has a specific description of what and how things happened. Vollmann kept making notes about every day in Pakistan, and that could be a reason why each of his descriptions is so detailed. As a writer who writes things extensively, with every peculiar detail there is, it is not a surprise to find that his book consists of many long, detailed descriptions. That is a reason why his book is slow in a sense: every event is described so precisely.

Dialogues in Vollmann's book are also very specific.

"Why did you leave Afghanistan?"

"The Russians beat me up because I was not loyal to the Karmal regime," said the man. "And I had not enough firearms—only one rifle for five, six males in the family, so we could not protect our womenfolk and children to be safe." (Vollmann 1992, 120)

In this example, we can see that Vollmann writes down extensive lines said by people. But that can be just his memory of the dialogue, where he is making up some phrases or completing the logical flow of the sentences for the sake of the narrative. That is one of the markers of fictionality according to Genette, as non-fiction cannot access the psychological reasoning of people in the narrative (1993, 66-67). Yet, that is not the case, as Vollmann was interviewing people, and the real reason for such specific dialogue lines from people might be the recording and later transcription of the actual dialogue. However, there is a possibility that dialogues with locals were real only for Vollmann, while locals were not completely genuine with him. At the same time, that does not compromise the factual accuracy of Vollmann's narrative: the fact that something told by others is covered in his book does not deny the fact of dialogue itself, meaning that everything captured by Vollmann was real. It is the embedded narratives by other "characters" that may be factually incorrect or intentionally misleading, making his informants, not him, potentially unreliable. What makes this argument even more legitimate is the fact that Vollmann is trying to be objective and keep the journalistic style of his writing. In the latter part of the book, he even changes the title of the section from "Conclusions" to "On the train", as he is not making any conclusions from the trip. All the materials are presented in a way that they can be real, but Vollmann does not claim locals to be a reliable source of information. Vollmann may be sincere and truthful, but he may also be naive and unreliable as a narrator at the same time. Whenever he was using an interpreter or tried to figure out what people were saying to him in Pushto, the distortion of the message due to poor language skills is unavoidable. No matter how hard he strives to render what people were telling him, he is still helpless. As well as any other scholar or communicator could be helpless while facing something unfamiliar, we see how Vollmann is helpless in his book.

Another example of a dialogue is:

"You pick it out, we buy for you now," said Akbar implacably.

“No, no, some other time.”

“Sure,” said Akbar, insulted.

It was the first time that the American had not given in.” (Vollmann 1992, 37)

That is a different type of detail, as here the author is making a statement of the other person's feelings about something. Akbar being insulted is Vollmann's interpretation of the situation. There is no way he could get into another human being's consciousness and access his thoughts and emotions. That is one of the places where fictionalisation could take place. We cannot be aware if that specific dialogue was recorded on tape, but there is no other evidence on how he understood or got the other person's perception on the issue. It is not a solid statement of fictionalisation, but it can be a marker to be cautious about other dialogues in the text.

Vollmann's book is a great example of thematic and stylistic borrowings, as it is also “imitating” a journalistic style and academic writing. There is a chronology section of 1734-1979 history at the end of the book. “1734 The Russians make conquests in Kazakhstan. 1747 Afghanistan is unified under Ahmad Shah in an absolute monarchy. 1765 The British take Calcutta. 1813 Persia signs the Treaty of Gulistan, yielding most of its territory in the Caucasus to Russia” (Vollmann 1992, 255). Here, we can see a chronicle, where a list of events is listed in chronological order with no logical explanation between events (Morson 2003, 61). That is almost a historian's set of events that were taken in chronological order to narrate our understanding of history. Yet, it can also be an imitation of academic writing, while in reality, it can be just a cherry-picking activity from the author to create a certain narrative in his view, without other points of view that make historical narratives more objective and reliable than memoirs. That can also be the case of a journalistic entry for the reader to follow the logic of the author's words.

There is also an entry from Brezhnev's interview that can be an example of journalistic style. Vollmann gives a lot of information directly copied from the source, which makes it more

journalistic or even academic. He is not interpreting things but rather collecting and connecting that information. This journalistic or ethnographic agenda is continued in the form of an interview with locals. Vollmann records and transcribes interviews, as they are his main source of information about the war and its effects. That can be a feature of his writing that makes it seem more factual, as it uses two factual styles, journalism and scholarship.

What might describe Vollmann's style adequately is "ethnographic memoir", as it contains the author's personal biographical information and field research. "An ethnographic memoir is a nonfiction text that recounts past individual experience as representative of a particular sociocultural group. These narrative constructions convey history through a personal lens and are subject to interpretation of viewpoint by the audience and sometimes by a self-conscious author" (Mills 2010, 345). Some research was done on the ethnographic memoirs by other scholars looking into the similarities of memoirs and ethnographic participatory research, such as the article by Maxime Polleri (2017).

The form of Vollmann's book is far from academic in a pure sense of the word. But it is close to the work of Serguei Oushakine, whose ethnographic research on Barnaul is taken as an academic work. *Patriotism of Despair* (2009) is a book with the same inscription of personal narrative, interviews and references to other media. Serguei Oushakine's work is focused on studying the post-Soviet Barnaul, where people who lost their Soviet ideology tried to find something to overcome nostalgia and trauma. Oushakine's main point is that the Russian national identity was not clear but split between a desire for modern liberal ways and nostalgic feelings toward Soviet life and ideology. In his interviews he uses nicknames or initials to cover the identity of his interviewees. Additionally, Oushakine provides a lot of photos, while Vollmann only gives drawings. There are plenty of other surface similarities, yet deeper research is needed to study this comparative case. For now, it suffices to indicate that Vollmann's book has borrowings from fiction, yet there are other markers from non-fictional

writings that are balancing it or contributing even more to the formation of the genre of the book, and its reliability as historical or ethnographic research.

With all the given information, we can see how William Vollman had collected a side of the Soviet-Afghan war we could never get otherwise. There is a picture of local leaders General N. and the Brigadier, who, according to the historical sources, should have received money from the US. Yet we can notice the lack of finance everywhere as if money never reached these places because of corruption or other reasons. While in Vollmann's narrative, we do not see any corruption. What can be the definition for such a case is that Vollmann's narrative was built under the control of local authorities, who could decide what and where could be shown or hidden from the American guy. There were rarely moments when some uncontrolled information was recorded, such as in an interview with non-local people. For example, interviews with Marie Sardie and Mary McMorrow in I.R.C. camps about the terrible situation with food, vaccines and sexism (Vollmann 1992, 124-126) are contrasted with the relative lack of factual data Vollmann collects from his other informants. There is no General or Brigadier, or any other local authority, to navigate his experience through the camp to make sure things are shown the right way.

All that becomes a story of Vollmann, a memoir of his journey in Pakistan. Only some sections of his book are journalistic investigations or ethnographic reports; others are reflective or poetic fictionalisations of a highly personal tone. The genre of the book could be redefined as ethnographic memoir, as it combines personal memories and/or ethnographic data. What is lacking, for sure, are solid results or definite conclusions of his research, and, probably, a research question on Vollmann's part, from the start. And that is the main reason why some publishers refused to accept the book: it contains no resolution. Vollmann just collects information and interviews people, along with going through his daily routines, but there is no answer to the big question he never even properly asked.

Svetlana Alexievich

Background Information

Svetlana Alexievich was born in 1948 in Ukraine, USSR. She is a journalist and the 2015 Nobel Prize laureate in literature. In her early career, she interviewed people for a local newspaper in Belarussian SSR. Her books are based on a great number of interviews and years of editing those (Prus 2017, 101-102). Her writing style is unique, and she was the first author-journalist to win the Nobel Prize. Her writing style is labelled as oral history, or documentary prose (Myers 2017, 331), or an ensemble of voices (Górska 2017, 296), or polyphony of voices (Prus 2017, 103) because all of her books are made of interviews.

She is famous for her book cycle “Voices from Big Utopia” with interviews of witnesses of World War II in *The Unwomanly Face of War* (“У Войны не Женское Лицо”, 1983), Soviet-Afghanistan War in *Boys in Zinc* (“Цинковые Мальчики”, 1989), the Chernobyl catastrophe in *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*⁶ (“Чернобыльская Молитва”, 1997) and others. Each of those is a collection of selected, ordered and edited interviews in the form of documentary prose that portrays actual events from the eyes of the witnesses with their feelings and emotions incorporated into their oral testimonies (Prus 2017, 104). Her books are opening up historical narratives from perspectives of victims and murderers, to commemorate the Soviet regime and utopian ideas that failed.

Alexievich’s literary predecessors are writers like Ivan Bunin, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Boris Pasternak, Mikhail Sholokhov, Iosif Brodsky, Vasil’ Bykov, and Ales Adamovich (Prus 2017, 101-102). Vasil’ Bykov is one of the main influences on Alexievich’s writing. According to Lipovetsky, Bykov, in his texts, explored the nature of human decision-making, whether the conditions of the situation were the factor or the character of the individual (2015, 260-261). That is a clear connection to Alexievich’s *Boys in Zinc* and other works, which is a “history of

⁶ *The Chernobyl Prayer: the Chronicles of the Future* in another translation

human feelings” (alexievich.info), describing how people felt and what kind of dilemmas they had during stressful situations. Such dilemmas are essential parts of each personal narrative of Alexievich’s characters.

Another important notion from Lipovetsky’s overview of Soviet literature is village prose (деревенская проза) and the technique of *skaz* (сказ) in Bykov’s texts, which worked as an alternative to the self-sabotaging and the falling apart of governmental ideology (2015, 63-64). According to Schmid *skaz* “manifests itself in a stylisation of the narrative text according to the non-literary forms of colloquial speech, as well as in the presentation of verbal communication and the strengthening of the expressivity of the narrative text, which reveals a non-professional narrator, whose thoughts, values and speech can become more important than the story which he is in the process of narrating.” (2010, 122). So, *skaz* is a speech-like narrative, a voice that is very different from the ordinary narratives of professionals.

Skaz, as a narrative device, provides some insights into Alexievich’s interview form. Firstly, her books are written as *skaz* – spoken speeches where characters are talking with simple words as if the narrative is a transcript of oral storytelling. At the same time, the voices she uses are reduced and edited so that she does not bombard readers with information. I mean that the text of Alexievich’s interviewees is kept in small portions, with no significant facts or dates, so the reader is completely focused on the feelings of the person and the atmosphere of the situation. Having multiple narrative voices makes Alexievich's work more understandable, as there are different stories to communicate better with different people, and it is not too many voices (Gotman 2019, 162). Secondly, like the village prose, *Boys in Zinc* tries to fill in the new idea, criticising the Soviet government’s ideology and decisions.

It is obvious that Alexievich’s book is not a *skaz* in the direct definition of the term. What I mean here is that Alexievich is creating a ‘*skaz-like*’ style in the book. *Boys in Zinc* has voices of other people and only a few entries from Alexievich herself. Those were interviews

that she edited and formed to fit into a book, being a narrative, not an interview transcript. So, Alexievich is imitating the way narrators in her interviews would tell the story. I assume that she is not directly transcribing interviews but constructing her own narrative out of those interviews. Maybe she does not change the words of her interviewees, but we clearly see how her questions and presence are almost wiped out. So, I can assume that not only her side of the interview (questions) is absent but also some of the part of her interviewees' words.

The way Alexievich preserved the *skaz*-like style is better seen through the original text in Russian: “От него узнал, что бэтээр подорвался на итальянской фугасной мине” (Alexievich 1989, 15). While the English translation could not conserve the ‘*skaz*-like’ style in “I learned from him that our personnel carrier was blown up by an Italian blast mine” (Alexievich 2017, 25). In this example, we can see that Alexievich is keeping the sound of oral narrative through how she spells the word “бэтээр”, which would be written *BTR* (БТР) or *Bronetransporter* (Бронетранспортер) otherwise. Exactly that happened in the English translation; they used “personnel carrier”, which is in no way close to the spoken version in Russian.

The development of *skaz* into oral history seems like a natural transition and gradual adjustment for the current times. *Skaz* originated from the speech of ordinary, unprofessional people, and their words, sounds and language were used to create a unique style (Schmid 2010, 122). The nature of Alexievich's work, which originates from interviews on tape, considers the same speech of ordinary people. But they are not necessarily villagers, so the classic definition of *Skaz* could not apply here fully. So, I suggest that Oral history is what works great as a new step in *skaz*-like style. But again, Alexievich does not give a rough transcript of her tapes; she is still editing and using literary techniques to convert oral speech into textual narrative.

It was mentioned that Alexievich's work is journalistic, but that is not completely true. According to Carlson, journalism tries to “explain the news story not as a mirror of an event

but as a constructed account shaped by and through a complex array of professional, organizational, technological, political, economic, and cultural factors” (Carlson 2016, 351). We can see that Alexievich is not giving her own constructed explanation of the Soviet-Afghan war but constructs it from other people’s stories.

In Alexievich's performance, the genre of oral history is a borderline of *skaz* and journalism, in my opinion. Her work combines two into a new genre that is relatively young compared to others. What makes the books of Alexievich a unique source is the combination of both. The *skaz* part of her narrative is giving a “realistic” effect on the reader, as it shows speech, not belles-lettres. Journalistic approach does not contradict the *skaz* effect but rather completes it with more documents and dates given by the author, who is a professional. Alexievich is a very small part of her own works and has a more professional and not *skaz*-like narrative voice in her entries, creating a contrast between a journalist and the people she interviews. Voices of ordinary people who experienced war and retell it in a way they can comprehend it make Alexievich’s books stand out from those of other journalists or documentary writers. Although it applies to all of Alexievich’s works, her way of preserving the real voices of people can be clearly seen in *Boys of Zinc*.

Boys in Zinc

Svetlana Alexievich's *Boys in Zinc* is part of her cycle "Voices from Big Utopia" or "Red Cycle" that lets the unspoken truth and stories become heard (Prus 2017, 105; Górska 2017, 296). That is one of her early works, which was published long before her Nobel Prize. As one of her works published during the Soviet period, it has two versions, one as a first publication in 1989 and the newest one with an additional introduction and trial documents. Those additional parts are placed at the beginning and the end, not changing the original text. Overall, there are 7 editions of the book to date, the latest being published in 2024 (alexievich.info).

The book does not have a central plot that connects the whole story; it is rather a collection of stories that are linked to the central idea. The book describes the situation on the battlefield and after the war through the words of witnesses, victims, killers and tries to stand aside without personal commentary on the issue. There are stories of veterans who suffer from PTSD, who are demonised by society, some of them becoming criminals; other stories are from their mothers, who are suffering from their sons' actions or mourning because their sons died in the war. Finally, after all the stories, Alexievich provides a short documentation of the trial that followed the publication of *Boys in Zinc*.

Jeffrey Jones describes the structure of the book by dividing women's images into three groups: the motherland, mothers of soldiers and women in Afghanistan. The first one represents the image of the motherland that changed over time since World War II. Alexievich's book shows the naivety and innocence of young soldiers who are going to war to protect their motherland, the same way their fathers went voluntarily during WWII, affected by the patriotic feeling (Jones 2017, 240). The second image is the "mourning mother", a character who is grieving because of her lost son, used as a contrast to the patriotic ideas of their sons and WWII (Jones 2017, 242-244). The cruelty and moral degradation in Afghanistan are shown through

the image of “morally loose” women, who were used only for sexual intercourse (Jones 2017, 246). This is not particularly true for every individual, but the collective stereotypical image is compromising them in that way.

The book is divided into seven sections: prologue, “From the Notebooks”, “Day One”, “Day Two”, “Day Three”, “Post Mortem” and “*Boys in Zinc* on Trial” (Alexievich 2017, i). The prologue is a personal narrative of a character, which is not different from stories in the body part of the book. Next are entries from Alexievich’s notebooks from Afghanistan. They contain a description of her trip to Kabul in September 1988. The main part of the book is a collection of personal narratives from interviewees, in three chapters. After that, there is a two-page “Post Mortem”, where Alexievich lists the names of soldiers who died. They look like epitaphs from a gravestone, as there are dates of their lives and causes of their death. The final part of the book is the description of the *Boys in Zinc* trial. It consists of documents and letters from the trial directly and from newspaper reports of it.

Analysis

In the epigraph, Alexievich is citing a long-lasting agenda of the Russian Empire conquering lands as far as India. “On 20 January 1801 the Cossacks of the Don Hetman Vasily Orlov were ordered to march to India. A month was set for the stage as far as Orenburg, and three months to march from there ‘via Bukharia and Khiva to the Indus River’” (Alexievich 2017, iii). We can assume that she is hinting at the Russian Empire's plan to reach India through Central Asia, drawing a parallel with how the Soviet Union later repeated that. The following sentence establishes the parallel: “In December 1979 the Soviet leadership took the decision to send its troops to Afghanistan” (Alexievich 2017, iii). As a result, entering Afghanistan is shown as a stopping point on the way, with a lot of soldiers killed, and hundreds missing in

action. It is not clear what exactly Alexievich's message with epigraphs is, an anti-empire or anti-Soviet idea. As it can relate to anything, yet we know that Alexievich is an anti-communist political activist (alexievich.info). Alexievich is using quotes from other official documents, implying that the idea of connecting Russia and or USSR to India geographically was intended ever since the era of the Russian Empire. That is just one of the reasons for the invasion Alexievich brings up, which can be interpreted as forcing all those soldiers to die for the sake of a centuries-old desire of the state.

The prologue is a narrative from a soldier's mother. "I walk alone... I'll be walking alone for a long time now" (Alexievich 2017, 1). She is talking about her son and makes pauses now and then. That can be seen from the dots between sentences. It seems like a story from the character who is talking. There is almost no narratorial invasion from Alexievich, apart from "We read books together... (She cries)" (Alexievich 2017, 2). That sentence shows the first author's entry and presence—in the mode of stage directions, as in a play or a transcript. At this point, dots can be proved to represent the struggle and emotions of the character. "Who taught him to kill? I didn't teach him that... (She loses control and shouts)" (Alexievich 2017, 7). Alexievich herself is contributing to the story only with minimal paratextual entries. Those are places where we can trace the author's voice. The narrative of the entire book is built almost exclusively from other people's discourse. And sometimes there is not even a name to a speaker but a blunt title: "A mother" (Alexievich 2017, 7). The person narrating this prologue has no name. There is no way to identify her and verify what she says. Alexievich treats herself in the same way: there is no name or anything else given to the narrator of the later parts of the book other than just "*the author*" (Alexievich 2017, 24). We don't know anything about those anonymised witnesses, including the interviewer, from the text itself.

After the Prologue, we have a section with entries from Alexievich's notebooks, where we can see more of the author's first-person narrative: "I saw military action..." (Alexievich 2017, 17). That is the only narrative from her own experience in Afghanistan, which is quite short compared to Vollmann, and even there, she is not really writing about herself but the cruelty of war. "Is it really going to go down in history? I strive desperately (from book to book) to do one and the same thing – reduce history to the human being" (Alexievich 2017, 18). Alexievich's main goal is the portrayal of human experience, individuals, and people with no voice, whom she wants to be kept in history. Because of this, we can assume that she does give herself so little space to talk, but passes it all to her interviewees.

Alexievich is quoting many fiction books in her diary from Kabul. All of the quotations are referenced by Alexievich in the text. We can see a William Shakespeare quotation from *Richard II*: "Each substance of a grief hath twenty shadows" (10). Two pages later, she cites Maxim Maximych from Lermontov's *The Hero of our Time*, "Of course, according to the ways, he was absolutely right" (Alexievich 2017, 15). And finally, Dostoyevsky's *Demons*: "Certainty and human being seem to be two separate things in many ways...Everyone is guilty... If only everyone was certain of that!" (Alexievich 2017, 19). Like Vollmann, Alexievich's diary entries do not look like a diary but a very much edited piece of text. While for Vollmann that was easily seen, as his whole book is his own story, Alexievich give us so little information about herself. And that is always edited, so it does not seem like a "real" diary.

While Vollmann appears to imitate the writing of fiction writers and keep it journalistic and maybe scholarly all at the same time, Alexievich gives us an interview with no interruptions by questions. Her documentary writing is shaped as a transcript to provide a platform for people to speak up. It is there that I believe we can see how Alexievich succeeds and Vollmann, in his

own terms, “fails”: there are not many voices from Afghanistani or Pakistani people in Vollmann that become heard or given a chance for a genuine interview, considering the language and cultural barriers. Alexievich collected people’s experiences by speaking their language to them, and their sincerity could be proved by the trial materials presented at the end of the book. People just opened up, thinking that their stories were not going to be shared, as they were in the end, trusting the author the way Vollmann’s interlocutors never did.

At the end of the diary section, we can see a list of names (Alexievich 2017, 21-22). There are names of people who were not afraid to be mentioned in the book. Many other characters decided to be kept secret, their identities not revealed. That is a reason for questioning whether Alexievich made up some of the stories or not. During the trial, it becomes apparent that the book dramatises the universal experience of many families. For example, one of the veterans mistakes a passage from a newspaper for his own interview published under a different name, while it turns out that it truly came from a completely different person, just someone with identical experience (Alexievich 2017, 232-233). Considering such cases, it may appear that, no matter how accurate Alexievich was in keeping each individual interview intact or blending some cases into one the way a fiction writer conventionally does, the result is that, like a poet according to Aristotle’s *Poetics*, she often ends up writing about the way things would generally “have to happen” according to a general order of life, instead of the way they happened to occur under particular historical circumstances (1987, 51b1-5).

At the beginning of each chapter, we have a chance to look at pieces that are “authored” by Alexievich, and her voice is clear. For the rest of the chapter, she gives credit for the story to her characters, the people who told the story during the interview. What is surely changed in her editing of the interviews is that she drops all her questions from the transcript, turning them into self-contained first-person narratives, as Alexievich herself assumes the position of

a non-intervening chronicler, scribe or scripter collecting the stories of her characters. Those are talking as if they are protagonists in a first-person novel, while we know that it is a transcription of the audio after the interview (Alexievich 2017, 244).

Entries from Alexievich in each chapter are from “*the author*”, and that gives us an idea that she is distancing herself from the book or the moments when she was writing it (Alexievich 2017, 24). Especially, we can see how she rewrites or adds entries sometime after finishing the first edition of the book, when people call her (Alexievich 2017, 23). What is problematic in that situation is the transcript of the talk: if that is a phone call, is there a way for her to audio-record it, or is she writing it out from the way she remembers it? That is a problem, as it allows an Alexievich sceptic to speculate that some of the things from that “call” can be made up for the sake of her narrative. Alexievich is keeping it like an interview transcript, this time a question-answer interview, not like other interviews in the book.

The narrative in the main part of the book is kaleidoscopic. Looking at the first story in the chapter titled Day 1, we can see a narrative from “a private, grenadier” (Alexievich 2017, 24-30). There is no chronological or thematic connection between each of the consecutive narratives. The grenadier’s narrative describes his experience after he was blown up and sent to the hospital. The part coming next is by “a private, motorized infantry”, and it is about him being silent for ten years about what happened in Afghanistan (Alexievich 2017, 30-32). There is no continuation of previously mentioned themes or topics. The same is the next narrative from a “nurse” (Alexievich 2017, 32-38), and it is not related to the next narratives by a “private, logistics driver” (39-40) or by a “mother” (40-44). There is no connection or logical sequence behind the existing order of narratives in the book. That is more like a chronicle, as there is no logical explanation of connections between each story (Morson 2003, 61). But the problem is that we don’t know if each story is not put in chronological order. And, inside each

of the stories, we can see the “explanation” that a chronicle should lack. Alexievich, as well as Vollmann, is on the borderline of genres.

“Post Mortem” is the section that is styled as a gravestone in the cemetery (Alexievich 2017, 229-230). It lists the names of six soldiers who died with messages from their families, as shown in figures 2 and 3. I could not find a reason for that section to be included and how the information was acquired, but here is my interpretation of its purpose. This two-page section where families could preserve memories about the soldier and say goodbye, since soldiers died in Afghanistan and returned in zinc coffins. Some of them never returned as their bodies were buried with many others in a mass grave.

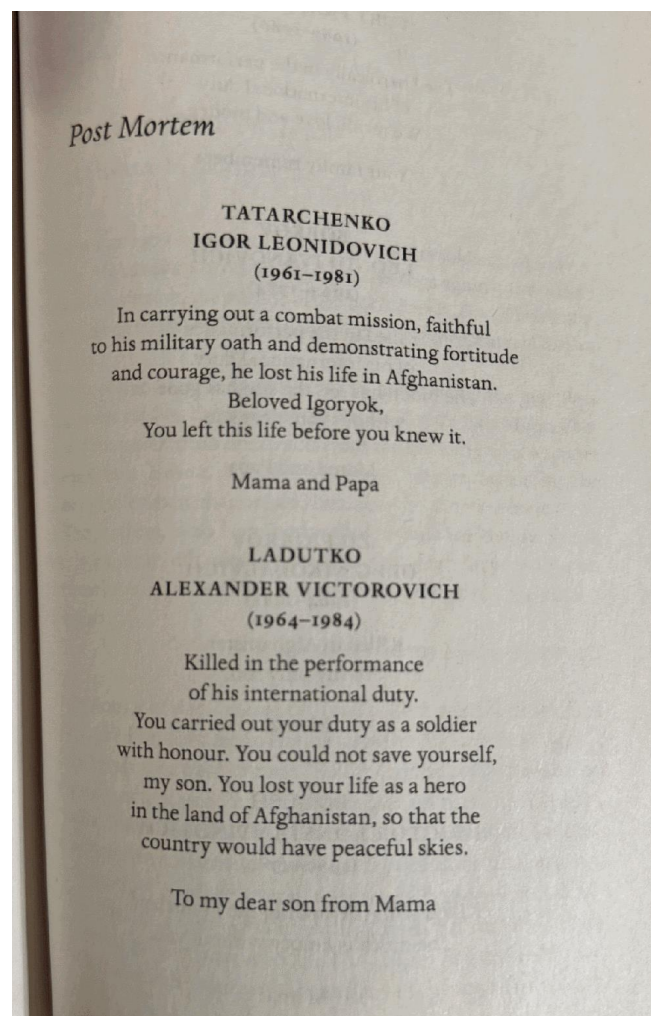


Figure 2.

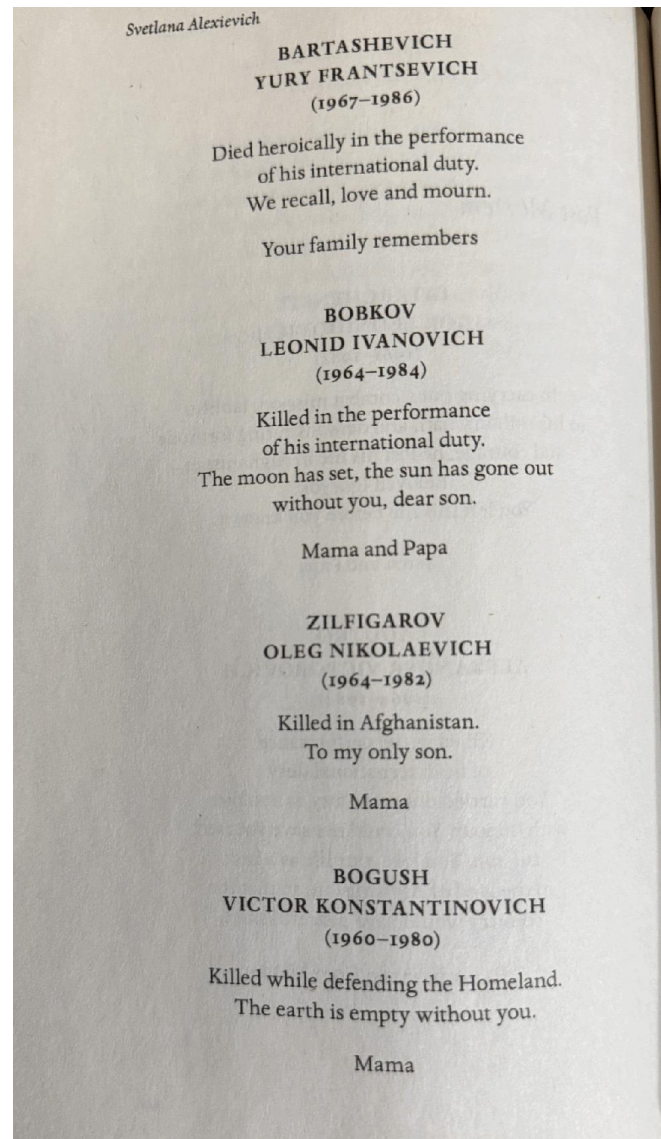


Figure 3.

The trial

A group of mothers from Alexievich's book filed a lawsuit against her in 1992. That was because of the *Boys in Zinc* play performed on the stage of Yanka Kupala Belarusian Theatre in Minsk and the publication of an excerpt from *Boys in Zinc* in the *Komsomolskaya Pravda* (*Комсомольская Правда*) (Alexievich 2017, 231). The play was recorded and later translated on Belarusian television. The reason for a lawsuit was that all the soldiers were portrayed as murderers. That trial is added to be a part of the book in each edition after that incident. The case itself is very confusing, as the newspaper materials, which attacked the author of *Boys in Zinc*, were published on the 19th of January, while the official documents about the opening of the case shown by the judge were all dated 20th of January (Alexievich 2017, 232). So, journalist of "Sobesednik" ("Собеседник"), Leonid Sveridov, claims that articles in newspapers were prepared before the case was opened (Alexievich 2017, 232). That is also pointed out by Alexievich with an exclamation mark before the very quotation from Sveridov: "In other words, it is obvious that press materials stating that the case was ongoing (!) had been prepared before the judge herself opened the case..." (Alexievich 2017, 232).

Sveridov strongly suggests that the whole case against Alexievich was fabricated. On the other hand, we have a problem with all her sources as well, as it is presented by Alexievich and her informant, Sveridov, who does not provide any proof for his arguments but an undocumented memory. Yet, if we do not take this claim on the pure fact of his experience of seeing the real document, then the whole book is even less trustworthy and just a speculation from the author.

Anatoly Kozlov writes an article for *Literaturnaya Gazeta* (*Литературная Газета*) about the main reasons for the trial, but the public never received any official statements from the court and documents of the lawsuit (Alexievich 2017, 232-233). One of the main cases that people brought up was a man, Oleg Sergeevich Lyashenko, who claimed that his interview was

altered and everything in it was a lie. The veteran of the Soviet-Afghan war demanded public apologies and compensation of fifty thousand roubles from Alexievich for a false representation of him and the war. Lyashenko refers to the publication of an excerpt from *Boys in Zinc* in the *Komsomolskaya Pravda* in 1989. According to Lyashenko, that is his interview given to Alexievich, but the name of the soldier in the interview is not his. The main reason Lyashenko filed a lawsuit is that Alexievich is getting a financial profit from the book, while he is portrayed as a monster and now is living off his pension with his wife and children (Alexievich 2017, 236).

However, with the available information, Alexievich's book seems to catch the experience of Soviet soldiers after the war, insofar as some of them mistake other people's stories for their own based on a small section in a newspaper publication. According to Alexievich herself, she changed the name of the soldier intentionally, hiding his identity from the KGB (Alexievich 2017, 236). That actually makes all of the interviews more credible, as the interviewee identified his own experience even under a different name. So, we can have an issue of either the author's manipulation of text or the universality of people's experience after the war. Both can be the case, as according to Myers (2017, 334), Alexievich has a habit of changing her interviews from time to time. How could Lyashenko notice that if the story was altered and the name was changed? My theory is that the story was not changed significantly. So, there is no accusation of changing facts, really, but the absence of monetary rewards for him and the non-heroic portrayal of his actions. Based on this, we can assume that Alexievich is writing the truth.

The second case on the same trial was about the same publication in *Komsomolskaya Pravda*. Mother of another soldier, Yekaterina Nikitichna Platitsyna, claimed that Alexievich made up some facts, intentionally took out some of Platitsyna's claims and came to her own conclusion (Alexievich 2017, 237). There were two moments when the mother said things were

wrong. The first one is the moment when the soldier was crying. The problem with this scene is that “this shows him as a cry-baby” (Alexievich 2017, 238). Since he was an “officer on active service”, he should not be portrayed as a “cry-baby” (Alexievich 2017, 238). And the second moment is the fact that he stood in a queue in a shop for a shawl. Mother claims that as an active service officer, he should not be portrayed standing in a queue during wartime. Both times, the character of the soldier is described through his role as a soldier. Even in this paper, he is referred to as a “soldier/officer”, while Alexievich probably tried to catch the human in him. Even his own mother failed to see that he was a living human being, only building everything around his social portrait as an active service officer. Again, in this case, we do not get any fact Alexievich distorted, only the fact that Alexievich includes some intimate moments her interviews did not think would/should be included. Both cases were dismissed as Lyashenko and Platitsyna did not show up for the trial.

Six months later, another case appeared in court: a mother's name is different from the real one, and a soldier's rank is wrong (Alexievich 2017, 246). All the same, people were complaining that Alexievich had changed the facts, but they could not prove anything. This time, the only issue was the fact that Alexievich published abroad, showing the cruelty of Soviet soldiers to others, which once again demonstrates that Alexievich was accused of many things but not of lying. Everyone who got into arguments against her in those cases was unhappy to see the representation of them or their family in a bad way, not about the fact that something was not true. No one cared to preserve the truth, so we can conclude that Alexievich's interviews, even edited and formed into a narrative form, are confirmed as factual even by those who challenged her.

Finalising my analysis of Svetlana Alexievich, it is important to mention her own view on her work. At the Nobel Prize Lecture, Svetlana Alexievich said, “So what is it that I do? I collect the everyday life of feelings, thoughts, and words. I collect the life of my time. I'm

interested in the history of the soul. The everyday life of the soul, the things that the big picture of history usually omits, or disdains. I work with missing history. I am often told, even now, that what I write isn't literature, it's a document" (Alexievich 2015). Here, Alexievich states that her work is a collection of people's individual histories. Each and every one of the small things usually ignored by scholars is covered in her book. Also, she clearly states that the history that she covers in her books was not meant to be "documents", probably referring to the historical records created by historians or official historical archives. Yet, her book became a historical record or "document". *Boys in Zinc* and other books of hers are collecting histories that are *not* kept in historical records. People's lives are not described chronologically or in any other order, and her writings register every single person as having their individual point of view and experience of a certain event.

The important question is why that part of the history was "left in the shadow". In my interpretation, history is usually too wide to cover everyone in the records of the event, so previous scholars mentioned only some of the important events and names. History was described through the chosen relationship or chronology and importance based on the individual person's view and choice of the narrative. Now, as technology and media have stepped up, and we can cover most of human history, stories of ordinary people can be collected too. So, here Svetlana Alexievich is covering the gap that existed before and setting a historiographic and literary trend at the same time.

Conclusion

There are several points made across this paper. First, documentary literature is an important part of history, as it uncovers previously less observed sides of global events. “Sometimes their lies can even achieve a sort of truth” (Letter from Rose Kernochan), or, as Aristotle believed, some stories about people are universal (1987, 51b1-5). It can be seen through Alexievich’s and Vollmann’s books. The factual representation of historical events in the book can always be questioned. The whole scope of war cannot be covered by a single work of documentary literature. In both Vollmann and Alexievich, we can see that even if the stories are partially fictionalised or created from a kaleidoscope of several stories, they still capture the atmosphere of events and the key aspects of human experience. Ordinary people’s lives are rarely described in such detail in other records, as the main thing most of the media tries to cover is basic points of what happened, where and why. Sometimes, if the name of the person is important, it is mentioned in the description of the event. If it is not, then there is another aspect of a person’s life that will identify and characterise that person in relation to historical events, such as job, religion, political position or other social marker apart from the proper names. We cannot say that Vollmann and Alexievich made up their stories, even though both were prosecuted for what they wrote and how.

Secondly, from the analysis of Alexievich’s and Vollmann’s works, it becomes clear that the issue with oral history and ethnographic memoir is that they are very different from the official line of narrative subject to an ideological bias, whether Soviet or American. Also, it is very different in form from what scholars do. They cover things that otherwise would have been kept secret or not even documented. Their use of creative writing and poetic tools does not nullify the credibility of the information they provide. I would argue that this creativity in their works is what makes non-fiction more important compared to classic historical records or other media sources. The use of creative ways of sharing information has a good chance of

being widespread compared to the scholarly works usually kept in academic journals for people in academia. Nowadays, non-fiction and true crime are trending genres in popular media cultures.

It is interesting how both books share many similarities, yet they achieved very different levels of popularity. There are several ways to describe why that happened. On the one hand, Svetlana Alexievich creates a narrative atmosphere that is very different from Vollmann's. Alexievich is consistent in keeping the sadness and depressive state of the people she interviewed. Even her own entries do not change the tone of the narrative. Vollmann, on the other hand, is way more diverse in that sense. He is very self-ironic, and that is probably the main mood of his work. There are also many sad and cruel moments along with some 'emotionless' letters or other documents. That is a result of the genres of the two books, which are affecting the way they are perceived.

The genres of *Boys of Zinc* and *An Afghanistan Picture Show* are both ambiguous. *Boys of Zinc* is an oral history that originated from the mix of *skaz* and journalism. Svetlana Alexievich is using the strength of both genres to deliver a massive, strong message about the cruelty of war. *Skaz* is making narratives of her interviewees' alive, while journalism is creating a contrast through Alexievich's entries with facts and documents. On the other hand, William T Vollmann is writing an ethnographic memoir that builds on the mixture of anthropological research and autobiography. His work is not free from being an outsider's view, but he provides a new perspective on the events from the Mujahideen's side in the Soviet-Afghan War. *An Afghanistan Picture Show* captures Vollmann's daily life and his findings about people in Pakistan through interviews, letters, chronicles, and drawings. Both authors found relatively young or even new genres for their books. That is a different and new way of writing about war compared to classic novels and historical scholarship. Alexievich and Vollmann are not in

the middle of the previous styles of historiography; they are expanding and giving an additional picture to look at.

Alexievich and Vollmann both construct kaleidoscopic narratives. Alexievich has little to no chronology in her book, only giving dates and order for her notebook and chapter entries, while the people's stories, per se, are put together with no chronological or thematic correlation. Vollmann has a straight narrative of his trip to Afghanistan, yet there are many places where he interrupts his past self to add information or change an opinion. Finally, both authors try to capture details of history, yet they reach out for different details. Alexievich tries to cover all the emotions and worries of the people she interviews. There is not so much numeric data and hardly any dates and names in her book. Vollmann is different: he seeks details, and he is trying to write with a degree of scholarly precision. He gathers stories from people and writes down dates, their names, interview locations, and so on. He directly inputs letters or drawings for the reader's visualisation, now that he does not have his photos to share. All those details make his narrative massive and slow, which can, again, be a reason for a drastic difference in recognition between him and the Belarusian Nobel laureate.

In conclusion, non-fiction will enrich the study of historical events. That is both for past, present and future events. Oral history like Alexievich's, and memoirs like Vollmann's, can capture and share way more than I covered in this paper. Neither author asked explicit questions, nor did they answer any, so there are still other things to research in their work from a different perspective. Namely, there is room for future scholarship related to the imperialistic or anti-imperialistic and colonial/ post-colonial aspects of the two books, which I did not attend to in this thesis.

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