

THE BODY AS A TRANSLATION: THE SENSES AND WORLD WAR II IN *U VOJNY NE ŽENSKOE LICO* BY SVETLANA ALEXIEVICH

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, we aim to study the human body as a form of translation by unfolding the (non)presence of the senses in two editions of *U vojny ne ženskoe lico*, one of the most successful “novels of voices” by Nobel Prize-winning author Svetlana Alexievich. First published in 1985, the book gathers testimonies of women who fought in the ranks of the Red Army during World War II. By conducting a comparative analysis of the appearance (and absence) of sensory perceptions in two versions of the text (from 1985 and 2013), we have concluded that the writer makes multiple changes at a microstructural level. The overlapping of the senses in the discursive construction of the most recent version of the book helps Alexievich to translate the horrors of the bloodiest conflict in history, enabling the reader to feel the war through the body of another person.

KEYWORDS: Body, Translation, World War II, Alexievich

1. Introduction

As Foucault ([1966] 2006, p. 233) once stated, “[t]he body is the zero point of the world”. This is how the French philosopher emphasised the role of the body as the main agent of life, the epicentre of every living being. For several decades now, scholars from different epistemological fields have been paying particular attention to the body beyond the physical or metaphysical plane to examine it as a set of semiotic elements. For Federici and Parlati (2018, p. 7), the body “has become a point of intersection between various fields because it has always been a powerful metaphor for the understanding and exploration of social issues, sexual controversies and cultural debates”. And, according to Baynham and Lee (2019, p. 29), “it makes sense to treat the body as a semiotic object in that it speaks, which would thus align the body with other semiotic modalities, having its own communicative affordances”.

Meanwhile, the senses, as phenomena inherent to corporeality, also possess this power. Through sensations, we gather information about the world and experience it; this is the way our body translates reality. At the same time, bodies not only translate our current life; they are also a great source of knowledge from our past that shows us many ways of interpreting history, understanding it and even feeling it with our bodies.

In this paper, we would like to examine what human bodies and the senses can translate about war, particularly about World War II. Our analysis will be carried out on a corpus compiled from two editions of *U vojny ne ženskoe lico*¹ (1985, 2013), a literary work by Svetlana Alexievich, Belarusian journalist and winner of the 2015 Nobel Prize for Literature “for her polyphonic writings, a monument to suffering and courage in our time”². First published in 1985, the book contains multiple testimonies of Soviet women who took

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¹ English edition: *The Unwomanly Face of War. An Oral History of Women in World War II*, translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Random House, 2017).

² <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2015/press-release/> (Accessed: 25 March 2022)

part in World War II. In its pages, the writer shares a new translation of the history of war from the double female point of view: from the witnesses she interviewed and from the writer herself. Alexievich (2013, p. 6) stresses that war as seen by women is different from war as seen by men, mainly because women focus on other aspects when they talk about it:

When women talk, this has nothing or almost nothing to do with what we are used to reading and hearing about: how some people heroically killed other people and won. Or lost. Which equipment there was and which generals there were. Female stories are different and about different things. “Women’s” war has its own colours, its own smells, its own light, and its own universe of feelings. Its own words. There are no heroes and incredible exploits, there are just people involved in inhumanly human tasks.³

As the author acknowledges, describing the war from a female perspective was a necessary task, since, in the case of the Soviet Union, war narratives were almost always presented from a male point of view. In the late 1970s, the future Nobel Prize winner decided to investigate how that approach would change if we were talking about women. As a result, she had the idea of interviewing former participants in the war and translating their stories. After talking to hundreds of women, in 1985 she published the Russian edition of *U vojny ne ženskoe lico*. It is worth noting that the text of the book has undergone numerous changes in the editions that have followed its first publication.

Which literary genre does *U vojny ne ženskoe lico* belong to? The debates about Alexievich’s books are ongoing, since researchers still have not had access to the recordings that she used to create her “novels of voices”, as she calls them. It is, therefore, impossible to determine the extent to which the journalist rewrites the initial material or manipulates the data. Nevertheless, some researchers have carried out the arduous task of comparing different editions of Alexievich’s works and have detected many discrepancies in the content (Ackerman and Lemarchand, 2009; Pinkham, 2016; Hniadzko, 2018). Thus, Hniadzko comes to the conclusion that, “Alexievich’s texts are collages of different little stories told by several people which she would later montage into one coherent narrative” (2018, p. 204). Although it is difficult to attribute a literary genre to her texts, specialists (cf. Novykov et al., 2021) relate it to the so-called *literary journalism*, placing her work somewhere between fiction and non-fiction.

In the latest edition of *U vojny ne ženskoe lico* (2013), the senses form the backbone of the narrative and allow Alexievich to embrace what Atwood (2009, p. 88) defined as “out of the body, onto the page”. Decades after the first publication of her debut novel,

³ Original: Когда женщины говорят, у них нет или почти нет того, о чем мы привыкли читать и слышать: как одни люди героически убивали других и победили. Или проиграли. Какая была техника и какие генералы. Женские рассказы другие и о другом. У «женской» войны свои краски, свои запахи, свое освещение и свое пространство чувств. Свои слова. Там нет героев и невероятных подвигов, там есть просто люди, которые заняты нечеловеческим человеческим делом. The translations from Russian into English in this article are ours.

Alexievich decided to rewrite it in order to focus more specifically on the human senses, a key tool for translating certain aspects of war. This is how she explains it:

I would like to write a book about war that would make people feel nauseous, that the very thought of war would be repulsive. Insane. That it would even make the generals feel nauseous...⁴ (Alexievich, 2013, p. 10).

Her idea is in line with one of Campbell and Vidal's (2019, p. xxxiv) approaches:

Perceiving through the eyes, ears, tongue or body of another opens the willing recipient (performer or spectator) to unfamiliar affects and sensory experiences, a "disorienting" event that can, if enacted in a safe environment, lead to personal growth and greater levels of awareness and understanding of the other, and thereby enhance cultural literacy.

Our main objective is to carry out a comparative analysis between two versions of *U vojny ne ženskoe lico*, published in 1985 and 2013, to determine how Alexievich translates the war through the senses and to reflect on the changes she introduces in her rewriting as well as the possible reasons for these modifications. In order to achieve the established objectives, we will draw on the comparative methodology of literary studies, as well as on the latest theoretical approaches in translation studies, which, among other novel approaches, have incorporated the concept of the body as a (form of) translation.

2. The body as a (form of) translation

Thanks to the latest theories in translation studies such as Gentzler's (2017) "post-translation" theory or Bassnett and Johnston's (2019) "outward turn", our discipline is increasingly opening up to new paradigms and seeking to study translation beyond mere interlinguistic transfer. In Gentzler's words (2017, p. 1), "translation phenomena appear in all languages, major or minor discourses, and in many forms of communication, not just written texts". The most progressive scholars amplify the concept of translation in their works and understand it as fundamental to all communicative acts. And, when we start thinking about what a communicative act is and who or what can communicate, we will realise that many objects around us can be studied within the framework of translation studies, even our own bodies.

Thus, we can say, with Vidal Claramonte (2018, p. 20), that the body "is never neutral and is never *only* a body, but a true semiotic system, of representation and of signification", which translates and can be translated. As Baynham and Lee (2019, p. 19) put it, "[o]ur body speaks"; consequently, in line with Cixous (1976, p. 880), "[c]ensor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time". Or, according to Reynolds (2020, p. 183), "the body has become a text imprinted by culture".

⁴ Original: "Написать бы такую книгу о войне, чтобы от войны тошнило, и сама мысль о ней была бы противна. Безумна. Самих генералов бы тошнило..."

The idea of studying the human body as a text or as a translation is not new; there is an increasing number of papers that focus their attention on what our body communicates and how it does it. Federici and Parlati (2018, p. 7) describe how the body functions as a “sign expressing a variety of metaphorical meanings” (and draws clear parallels with the concept of translation. In this regard, we can recall two articles published by Bennett (2007a, 2007b), in which she studies how the body communicates through movement, turning ballet into intersemiotic translation; or Vidal Claramonte’s analysis (2022) of the works of photographer Cindy Sherman, who “post-translates, translates outward by using her own body as a text that rewrites other bodies in order to deconstruct the male gaze” (Vidal Claramonte, 2022, p. 65). Other studies worth mentioning include articles by Baynham and Lee (2019), who seek to explain how gestures in capoeira and basketball can be interpreted as translations, and McCartney (2019), who, with the help of several dancers, studies how Michael Jackson posters are translated into movement. We might also recall two works by Carrasco López (2017, 2019), analysing the post-translations of women’s bodies in the novels of Moroccan-Spanish writer Najat El Hachmi; Rodríguez Arcos’ (2018, 2019) research on the rewritings of the female body in the media; Martínez Pleguezuelos’ (2021) study of the translation of the queer body or Cantarero Muñoz’s (2020) analysis of the new social network identities as post-translated bodies.

3. The female body in World War II: A Soviet perspective

Before going into detail about Alexievich’s work, it is important to consider the representation of the female body in war constructed by Soviet ideologues. In this sense, we witness the manipulation and projection of male visions onto the female body, with the aim of encouraging men to fight against Nazi Germany.

Among the best-known images, perhaps we should name the poster “Motherland is calling” (1941). It depicts a woman covered with a red cloth, who personifies a common mother for all Soviets—their Motherland—that they have to defend. This woman stares into the eyes of her viewer, engaging in an imaginary dialogue to convey the message of enlisting in the army. It should be pointed out that the image of the Motherland was first used by the White movement during the years of the Russian Civil War, but was subsequently appropriated by the Bolsheviks. According to Haarmann (2000, p. 6):

The connection between femaleness and Russia is initially invoked merely by its grammatical rendering: *Rossii* carries a female gender, also the names of many nations whose people speak Slavic or Romance languages [...]. In Russia, however, this feminine identity is more deeply rooted; it extends to the multinational state being called a motherland rather than a fatherland. Not only does "Mother Russia" imply the protective spirit inherent in motherly attitudes and behavior, but it is also an allegory of the earth itself as a caring mother intrinsically related to village life, drawing sustenance from the soil.

Another famous depiction of the female body in war is a photo of the corpse of Zoya Kosmodemanskaya, an 18-year-old Soviet partisan, tortured and executed by Hitler’s

soldiers. This horrifying image of the body desecrated by Germans was published in *Pravda*, one of the most important Soviet newspapers, in January 1942. The article builds a myth about the life of Zoya, called Tanya, creating a story which somewhat resembles the life of Joan of Arc, a French heroine of the Middle Ages. The story goes that she kept threatening the Nazis until the very last moment. This image also motivates the Soviets to join the army to defend Russian women from these kinds of atrocities. While the image of the Motherland is associated with the representation of a mother or a wife (if we talk about the adult population), in the case of Kosmodemyanskaya, we are dealing with the case of a young girl who can be identified as a sweetheart or daughter of a soldier.

Finally, in many photographs from the war years we can see military women represented as sexual objects: beautiful, smiling, with model-like faces, sexy, well-dressed and well-groomed, as if they had just come out of a salon or a hairdresser's. These images published in the press were far from reality in several ways. For example, many women had to cut their hair and looked more like boys. In most cases, they had to wear men's clothes and shoes, because, in the early war years, there were no specific items produced for women. Difficulty in grooming was also a fact. We may also note that war photographs rarely show older or disabled women. In summary, we believe that all these (non)representations of women had only one function: to support the men who were on the front line encouraging them to stand against the enemy.

4. Bodies that translate the war in *U vojny ne ženskoe lico*

The importance of the concept of the body for Alexievich can even be perceived from the title of the book: *U vojny ne ženskoe lico* (*The Unwomanly Face of War*). The word *war* (*vojna*) is feminine in Russian, and so if war doesn't have a woman's face, what face does it have? We could ask whether the Belarusian writer felt that war has a man's face, or whether, perhaps, it is a faceless being.

How does Alexievich translate war? We want to emphasise that she not only uses the female body to express different sensations experienced by women on the front line, but also uses the concept of the body and related elements such as clothes or shoes to broaden her image of war, to show how people lived in that period, what fears women had and how they saw themselves. In this section, we will expound on several examples that illustrate different aspects related to the depiction of corporeality in war. The collected examples are from the 2013 edition.

One of the ideas Alexievich formulates in the book is the body's refusal to kill. The journalist exposes this through a story of a sniper who described her physical and emotional sensations about shooting a Nazi soldier for the first time: "Suddenly a thought came to me—he's a human being, he's an enemy, but he's a human being—and my hands began to tremble, I felt the trembling in my whole body, I got chills"⁵ (p. 27). Something similar was experienced by other women both during and after the war: "Many of us got sick. I had a

⁵ Original: "[И] вдруг такая мысль мелькнула: это же человек, хоть он враг, но человек, и у меня как-то начали дрожать руки, по всему телу пошла дрожь, озноб".

fever. Chills. I was lying there and crying”⁶ (p. 41); “How can they walk on our land! [...] My body temperature went up from those scenes”⁷ (p. 43); “My nose bled from fear, I wasn’t sure if I was still alive”⁸ (pp. 81-82). Women also remember the continuous fatigue: “[Y]our eyes get tired, get watery, you don’t even notice your hands, your whole body goes numb with tension”⁹ (p. 28); “Our eyes were so tired that it was hard to close them...”¹⁰ (p. 79).

Many of the soldiers interviewed focus on their physical appearance and reflect on their hair and clothing in the war years. They talk about the hair greying due to stress: “At nineteen my hair turned grey”¹¹ (p. 39); “At the age of twenty-two, I was standing guard for the first time...In those two hours my hair turned grey...”¹² (p. 52). They also regret the fact that they had to cut their hair, which made them look like men: “The girls arrived at military school with long braids... [...] Our commander [...] told us all to cut off our braids”¹³ (p. 48). It was not only the haircuts that made them feel uncomfortable. Alexievich’s interlocutors often describe the men’s clothes and shoes they had to wear: “I was ready to do great deeds, but I wasn’t ready to wear boots size 42 instead of 35. So heavy and so ugly!”¹⁴ (p. 48); “You’re at war, you’re preparing to die for the Motherland, and you’re wearing men’s underpants. You look ridiculous”¹⁵ (p. 53).

Another important point highlighted in the book is the desire to die rather than be disfigured or disabled: “I asked only one thing of God, that if they mutilate you, better let them kill you”¹⁶ (p. 27); “[I]t is better to have your head blown off by a shell than to be captured and brutalised”¹⁷ (p. 42). Finally, Alexievich also talks about the taboo subject, the use of women on the front line as sex objects: “There were three girls with us. At night, they got intimate with everyone who was able...”¹⁸ (p. 16).

5. World War II through sensory perceptions

In this section, we seek to explore the presence and absence of sensory perceptions in two editions of *U vojny ne ženskoe lico*. The five main senses (touch, smell, sight, hearing and taste) form a fundamental part of the narrative space of the most recent version of the book (2013) and allow Alexievich to transport us into the world of war. She probably did

⁶ Original: “Много нас тогда заболело. Температура высокая. Озноб. Лежу – плачу”.

⁷ Original: “Как они могут ходить по нашей земле! [...] У меня поднималась температура от этих сцен”.

⁸ Original: “У меня течет кровь из носа от страха, не знаю: жива я или не жива?”

⁹ Original: “[Г]лаза устают, слезятся, рук не чувствуешь, всё тело от напряжения немеет”.

¹⁰ Original: “До того глаза устанут, что трудно их закрыть...”

¹¹ Original: “В девятнадцать лет поседела”.

¹² Original: “[М]не было двадцать два года, я первый раз стояла на посту... И я за эти два часа поседела...”

¹³ Original: “Девушки приехали в училище с длинными косами... [...] Наш командир [...] велела всем косы состричь”.

¹⁴ Original: “Я готова была совершить подвиг, но не готова была вместо тридцать пятого носить сорок второй размер. Это так тяжело и так некрасиво!”

¹⁵ Original: “Ты на войне, собираешься умереть за Родину, а на тебе мужские трусы. В общем, ты выглядишь смешно”.

¹⁶ Original: “Об одном я Бога просила, если тебя изуродуют, то пусть лучше убьют”.

¹⁷ Original: “[П]уть лучше головы снарядом сорвет, чем они возьмут нас в плен, будут издеваться”.

¹⁸ Original: “У нас было три девушки. Они приходили ночью к каждому, кто мог...”

not pay attention to those aspects in the first draft, or else the Soviet censorship, which the author mentions, changed her plans. However, thanks to the extensive material Alexievich had collected while interviewing the female soldiers, she was able to modify the text later. We have chosen two references for each of the five senses mentioned in order to illustrate how the Belarusian writer constructs and reconstructs the everyday life of war.

5.1 Touch

The references to the perception of touch inject some uniqueness into the work, as they provide us with a possibility to “feel” the war. The main function of the skin is to protect our bodies from the outside world, to create a barrier between human beings and the environment. However, Alexievich’s interlocutors show that this barrier is not so insurmountable in the case of war.

As can be seen in Table 1, in the first edition of the work, one of the witnesses merely notes the fact that she had been taught to shoot with a rifle. However, in the second version of the same fragment, Alexievich adds a reference to the unpleasant sensation of holding a rifle in her hands. It is important to note that the interviewee is Maria Morozova, one of the best Soviet female snipers. Certainly, hearing it from a woman of this profession sounds strange; we believe that the Belarusian journalist chooses to add this detail to show that, even though Morozova managed to shoot down 75 Germans, her skin remembers the unpleasantness of holding the rifle.

1985 (p. 64)	They taught us how to shoot a combat rifle. ¹⁹
2013 (p. 25)	There they taught us how to shoot a combat rifle, to throw grenades. At first...I’ll confess, I was afraid to pick up the rifle, it was unpleasant. ²⁰

Table 1. Morozova’s testimony.

Another example of unpleasant and uncomfortable feelings is that of contact between the body and the mud (Table 2). In the 2013 edition, through Maximchuk’s testimony, Alexievich shows the harsh weather soldiers had to deal with in the years of World War II. In this case, the witness explains that, due to weather conditions, on certain occasions the ground turned into mud that resembled dough. The soldiers had to carry heavy loads of military equipment through that mud. Knowing this, the reader can easily imagine the feeling of dampness and leg fatigue that the interviewee would have experienced. We can visualise Maximchuk in the midst of all this mud and, at the same time, we perceive her physical pain at the thought of how hard it would be for her to take each step. In the 1985 edition, this passage was omitted.

¹⁹ Original: “Нас там обучали стрелять из боевой винтовки”.

²⁰ Original: “Нас там учили стрелять из боевой винтовки, бросать гранаты. Первое время... Я, признаюсь, боялась винтовку в руки брать, было неприятно”.

1985	[Absent fragment]
2013 (p. 42)	I remember how we carried the shells, carried the equipment through the mud, especially in Ukraine, the ground after rain or in spring was so heavy, it was like dough. ²¹

Table 2. Maximchuk’s testimony.

5.2 Smell

As in the previous examples, in the case of the sense of smell, the writer also plays with the reader’s sensory perceptions. Here are two fragments that Alexievich modifies in the rewritten versions of *U vojny ne ženskoe lico* to convey the smells of war.

What does war smell like? War has a fusion of smells that Alexievich introduces in the last edition of the fragment compiled in Table 3. This witness confesses that she still remembers the smell of corpses and *mahorca*, a kind of cheap tobacco. The stench of corpses has a clear association with death, while smoking is a historically male attribute. Tobacco use is also linked to stress, as at the time it was the only escape from reality available to Soviet soldiers, along with alcohol. So, the wartime smells mentioned by the sniper evoke the sensation of death, of the presence of men and of continuous nervousness.

1985 (p. 70)	I had been on the front line, what hadn’t I seen? Corpses and all the rest. And I was afraid to cross a ravine. It turns out that the war changed nothing in us. ²²
2013 (p. 29)	I had been on the front line, what hadn’t I seen? Corpses and all the rest. And I was afraid to cross a ravine. I still remember the smell of corpses mixed with the smell of <i>mahorca</i> [cheap tobacco]... But then I was still a girl. ²³

Table 3. Morozova’s testimony.

Another smell of the war that some interviewees recall is the smell of burning. In Table 4, we see an example describing this smell, or rather a mixture of smells, as it combines the smell of burnt animals, burnt forests and burnt food (in the 1985 edition this fragment is not present). The interviewee emphasises several times that the smell was strange, unfamiliar, and one had to get used to it. This focus on smells allows Alexievich to expand the destructive image of war, which we usually see in films or books, and to accompany it with smells.

²¹ Original: “Помню, как таскали снаряды на себе, таскали орудия по грязи, особенно на Украине, такая тяжелая земля после дождя или весной, она как тесто”.

²² Original: “[Ф]ронт прошла, чего только не повидала: и смертей, и разного, а тут овраг перейти страшно. Оказывается, война ничего в нас не изменила”.

²³ Original: “[Ф]ронт позади, чего только не повидала: и трупов, и разного, а тут овраг перейти страшно. Я до сих пор помню запах трупов, смешанный с запахом махорки... Но так девчонкой и осталась”.

1985	[Absent fragment]
2013 (p. 83)	The field and forest were burning...The meadow was smoky. I saw burnt cows and dogs...An unusual smell. Unfamiliar. I saw...Burnt barrels of tomatoes, of cabbage. Birds were burning. Horses...Many...Many black objects lay on the roads. You had to get used to that smell... ²⁴

Table 4. Anonymous testimony.

5.3 Sight

The narrative world that Alexievich builds in her several books offers innumerable images that arouse feelings and whose function goes beyond a simple representation of war. In this context, we would like to mention a reference that appears in an article by Daniuska González González (2018, p. 104 and p. 109), dedicated to another work by the Nobel Laureate, *Černobyľ'skaja molitva* (*Chernobyl Prayer*). González González resorts to an unexpected comparison between the texts of the Belarusian writer, the photos taken in Auschwitz and the objects in the Chernobyl Museum: a curious description, in all three sources, of dolls left behind, scattered on the ground. In the case of *U vojny ne ženskoe lico*, we also witness how the author relies on striking images and plays with colours (red and black) to translate the horror of war through the eyes of its witnesses.

Morozova asks a rhetorical question about whether war films can be coloured (Table 5). But, at the same time, she states that in war everything is black, only the blood is red. This mixture of colours, black and red, represents a dark and gloomy image, an image of war.

1985 (p. 72)	I don't remember either the birds or the flowers. Of course, they were there, but I don't remember them. So...It's strange, isn't it? ²⁵
2013 (p. 30)	I don't remember either the birds or the flowers. Of course, they were there, but I don't remember them. Yes, yes...It's strange, isn't it? Can war films be coloured? Everything there is black. Only the blood is a different colour, only the blood is red... ²⁶

Table 5. Morozova's testimony.

The contrast between the red colour of blood and the other colours recurs in the book's pages, but this time only in the last edition (Table 6). Semyonova, another of Alexievich's

²⁴ Original: "Горело поле и лес... Дымил луг. Я видела сгоревших коров и собак... Запах непривычный. Незнакомый. Я видела.... Сгоревшие бочки с помидорами, с капустой. Птицы горели. Кони... Много... Много всего черного валялось на дорогах. К этому запаху тоже надо было привыкнуть..."

²⁵ Original: "Ни птиц, ни цветов не помню. Они, конечно, были, но я их не помню. Вот такое... Странно, правда?.."

²⁶ Original: "Сколько была война? Четыре года. Очень долго... Ни птиц, ни цветов не помню. Они, конечно, были, но я их не помню. Да-да... Странно, правда? Разве могут быть цветными фильмы о войне? Там все черное. Только у крови другой цвет, одна кровь красная..."

interviewees, recalls the battle of Stalingrad, one of the bloodiest battles of World War II. While, in the 1985 edition, the witness simply states that she arrived in Stalingrad, in the 2013 edition, she gives more details. She stresses that it was the deadliest place and, to illustrate this observation, she points out that the water and the land there were red, red because of the blood. The reader can only imagine what it would be like to see it in person.

1985 (p. 112)	We arrived in Stalingrad. There was deadly battle going on there. ²⁷
2013 (p. 54)	We arrived in Stalingrad. There was deadly battle going on there. It was the deadliest place...The water and the land were red... ²⁸

Table 6. Semyonova's testimony.

5.4 Hearing

In *U vojny ne ženskoe lico*, Alexievich frequently includes references to sounds. Noises and silences are placed in many of the descriptions and create a cinematic effect, as the reader gets to "hear" the war. For this paper, we have chosen two representative examples to show how war "sounds".

In Table 7, Klavdia Krokhtina recalls the moment she killed a German soldier for the first time. In both versions of this story, she stresses that she was trembling and crying after she had done it: she confesses that it was nothing like shooting at targets. Her testimony focuses on the difficulty of killing, but not only on the psychological aspect. In this context, we would like to point out an extraordinary detail in the last edition of the fragment, "...I heard my bones knocking". Through this chilling sound, both the author and the interviewee emphasise the body's refusal to kill on a physical level.

1985 (p. 67)	And, you know, my whole body started to tremble, my whole body was shaking. ²⁹
2013 (p. 27)	And, you know, my whole body started to tremble, I heard my bones knocking. ³⁰

Table 7. Krokhtina's testimony.

The following passage shows a different image of war, no longer of the physical sensations of a soldier, but of the sounds of battle (Table 8). In both versions of the fragment the sounds are the protagonists. While in the 1985 edition, the focus is on screams and groans, in the later version we are provided with more details: the description of the sounds of breaking bones. The already frightening narrative is intensified and accompanied by the sounds that rarely come to mind when we imagine a battle. We tend to think of screams

²⁷ Original: "Прибыли мы к Сталинграду... Там смертные бои шли."

²⁸ Original: "Прибыли мы к Сталинграду... Там смертные бои шли. Самое смертельное место... Вода и земля были красные..."

²⁹ Original: "И вот, знаете, меня всю затрясло, меня колотило всю".

³⁰ Original: "И вот, знаете, меня всю затрясло, я слышала, как стучали мои кости".

or gunshots, at least that is what is usually depicted in war films. However, some details can only be revealed to us by witnesses.

1985 (p. 163)	Heavy combat. I was in hand-to-hand combat...It is horrific. A human turns into something...inhuman... [...] They break each other's bones. Howls, screams, groans. ³¹
2013 (p. 87)	Heavy combat. I was in hand-to-hand combat...It is horrific...Inhuman... [...] They break each other's bones. Howls, screams. Groans. And that crunching... That crunching! Impossible to forget it. The crunching of bones...You hear a skull crack. How it splits open... ³²

Table 8. Omelchenko's testimony.

5.5 Taste

The sense of taste is practically absent in the text. This may be due to the wartime famine, the lack of food supply. In the collected testimonies, food is often related to the imaginary life after the war. Many interviewees dream of eating bread when they come back from the front line.

In Table 9, we see a peculiar situation: Alexievich presents two different views of the same testimony about the person's eagerness to fight against Nazi Germany. In the first edition of the book, Lyubchik merely observes that she wanted to join the army. Later, however, Alexievich changes this view by adding a clarification that the witness was starving and wished to go to the front line because some food would be available there. Possibly, the first version was censored, since in the Soviet Union it was important to show the willingness to defend the homeland—a patriotic idea—and not to look for food, a biological necessity.

1985 (p. 97)	The only thing on our mind was to get to the front line. ³³
2013 (p. 44)	We were starving. The only thing on our mind was to get to the front line. There would be food there. There would be rusks and tea with sugar. They would give us butter. ³⁴

Table 9. Lyubchik's testimony.

³¹ Original: "Бои тяжелые. В рукопашной была... Это ужас. Человек таким делается... это не для человека... [...] Ломают кости. Вой стоит, крик, стон..."

³² Original: "Бои тяжелые. В рукопашной была... Это ужас... Это не для человека... [...] Ломают кости. Вой стоит, крик. Стон. И этот хруст... Этот хруст! Его не забыть. Хруст костей... Ты слышишь, как череп трещит. Раскалывается..."

³³ Original: "В мыслях одно – попасть на фронт".

³⁴ Original: "Голодали. В мыслях одно – попасть на фронт. Там питание какое-никакое. Будут сухари и сладкий чай. Дадут масло".

Finally, we present one of the few descriptions of “food” that Alexievich shares with the reader (Table 10). Through a testimony of Podvyshenslaya, the writer portrays the horrors of the siege of Leningrad (1941–1944) that left the city practically without nourishment. Many contemporaries remember that citizens starved to death and looked like skeletons; there were cases of cannibalism. Podvyshenskaya describes the physical appearance of malnourished children who looked like old people. While in the 1985 edition she simply specifies their appearance, in the latest edition of the book she explains possible reasons for how they came to be in this state. According to the interviewee, there was no food in the city. People ate glue, shoes, belts, as well as animals and birds that lived there. The reader can imagine that the taste of the food was the less significant: the aim in the war was to survive by filling the stomach.

1985 (p. 131)	They were not children, they were sort of little old people. ³⁵
2013 (p. 66)	They were not children, they were sort of little old people. Mummies. They explained to us their menu, so to speak, during the siege: soup made with leather belts or new leather shoes, aspic made with carpenter’s glue, mustard pancakes...They had eaten all the cats and dogs in the city. The sparrows and magpies had disappeared. They even caught rats and mice to eat them... ³⁶

Table 10. Podvyshenskaya’s testimony.

6. Discussion

So, why does the writer make all these changes in the description of the senses in the latest editions of her book? First of all, we would like to point out that Alexievich rewrote *U vojny ne ženskoe lico* while she was a citizen of another country. The original text was published in the Soviet Union and was part of the so-called *war literature*, a very popular literary genre in the USSR. Censorship was an amount feature of the period, not only the state censorship that the author herself talks about, but also self-censorship. However, the latest version of her work was published in Belarus, a young country which, while maintaining a certain connection with the Soviet political tradition, is no longer linked to the communist regime. It is also important to mention that, before settling in Belarus in 2013, Alexievich spent more than ten years living in several different European countries, which may also have influenced her understanding of the world and prompted her to rewrite her debut book.³⁷

Secondly, a few years after publishing *U vojny ne ženskoe lico*, Alexievich had an opportunity to witness an armed conflict with her own eyes: she came face to face with the

³⁵ Original: “Это были не дети, это были какие-то маленькие старички”.

³⁶ Original: “Это были не дети, это были какие-то маленькие старички. Мумии. Они нам рассказывали о блокадном меню, если можно так выразиться: суп из кожаных ремней или кожаных новых ботинок, заливное из столярного клея, блинчики из горчицы... В городе съели всех котов и собак. Исчезли воробьи, сороки. Даже крыс и мышей ловили, чтобы съесть...”

³⁷ Alexievich has been residing in Germany since 2020 due to the political situation in Belarus.

war in Afghanistan while working on her new book. This experience could have changed her view of war and shown her the need to rewrite it.

Thirdly, the author's own particular style was gradually shaped as each new book came out. When working on new material, she sought her own way of expressing herself and constructing her narrative. Perhaps she wanted to give the texts that were already known to the public a second life.

And, finally, in one of her interviews in 1995 (Bek, 1995), the future Nobel Prize winner states that if she had been working on the book at that time, she would have asked her interviewees different questions. She would have tried to dig deeper into human nature and get closer to human beings as a biological species. We believe that, through her interweaving of the senses in the latest rewriting of the testimonies, the journalist tries to do just this: she focuses her attention on impressions of physical reality such as sounds, smells, colours or tactile sensations. These are her instruments for translating the war.

7. Conclusion

Alexievich's work is just one example of how the history of a war can be translated from a female perspective through the human body and senses. Alexievich embraces what Baynham and Lee (2019, p. 162) defined as "[t]ext and body cross[ing] each other", showing that, in order to describe the horrors of an armed conflict, it is not so relevant to cite the number of deaths or to specify the conduct of the enemy: it is enough to construct the narrative in such a way that the reader notices the presence of the witnesses and how incredibly intimate their story is. By resorting to the format of an emotional monologue, the writer alerts us to the fact that the war story is not a tale of unattainable feats and bravery, but, rather, a dark episode in the lives of people who are just like us. While in the first edition of *U vojny ne ženskoe lico* Alexievich was only beginning to develop this approach, in the latest edition she goes further, paying special attention to the senses that help her to translate certain aspects of war.

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Savchenkova, M. - The body as a translation

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