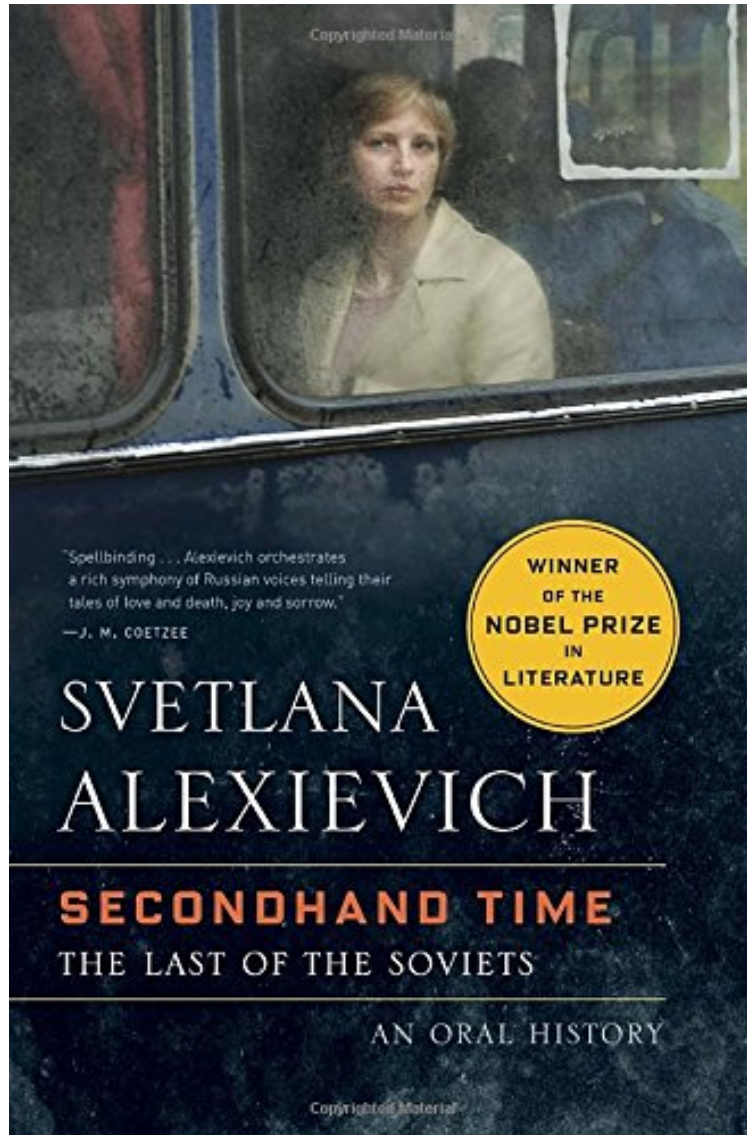


Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets

Svetlana Alexievich

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Svetlana Alexievich : Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets:

107 of 109 people found the following review helpful. Secondhand TimeBy History EnthusiastHaving read hundreds of books on the Soviet Union and today's Russia there are few that make the kind of impression that Alexievich's latest foray into the lives of generations of former Soviet men and women has left on me. "Secondhand time" is a book about

life and death, suffering, tragedy, the human condition and what life is like in a space that encompasses a world not totally forgotten, that of the Soviet Union, and one not totally understood, crony capitalism moving in the direction of new-age fascism. The weaknesses or biases of the book are few, even though they are important to remember. This is a book based on human memory and one that mainly concentrates of women and their stories, all too often filled with adversity, desperation, humiliation and misfortune. Although human memory is imperfect, there are snapshots that have entered everyone's consciousness and which can readily be recalled that seem to portray events that took place just yesterday yet truly occurred years or decades ago. As the interviewees discuss traumatic events in their lives (war, terrorism, murder, violence, etc.), there is more reason to believe that what they are recalling is closer to an emotionally honest and raw remembrance than a self-censored, stylized depiction of events. In some ways I would compare this volume with Solzhenitsyn's Gulag Archipelago in its emotionally draining narrative. At almost five hundred pages this is a book best consumed slowly, methodically, with a lot of stops and interruptions to give readers time to digest what they've read and what has been related to them. The book itself is divided into two main sections, interviews from the 1990s when the Soviet Union fell apart and those from the 2000s. The 1990s were best represented by regular violence in the streets, against everyday people and newly created "businessmen." Many were angry and could not understand how authorities could simply "give away" what was the "Soviet Empire." The social-contract that previously existed was done away with. Where previously people might not have trusted the government or its organs, they understood that jobs, medical care, education, etc., would be available and provided for those in need. When "capitalism" was announced, with no real explanation by authorities or understanding by the majority of the population, social and cultural ideals cultivated under the Soviets for decades were replaced by the all mighty dollar. Those with connections or the "entrepreneurial spirit" - who didn't see it as beneath themselves to sell, buy, barter and "hustle" their way to better living conditions - did well, while those who continued to believe that the state would or should provide the basic necessities of life, or were simply not equipped for a capitalist market, suffered. Seniors, who survived the Stalinist purges and lived to see victory in the Second World War were looked down upon. These men and women defined themselves against a state that "won the war" and "beat Hitler" but were viewed as useless beneficiaries of a system that, while they might have fought and suffered for, no longer existed. Gangs preyed on the weak and violence was a daily occurrence the results of which could be seen on the streets by passersby. Xenophobia that was kept in check by Soviet authorities appeared once more as minor conflicts broke out in the Baltics, among Armenians and Azerbaijanis and in Central Asia. Neighbors and friends that you previously got along with or played with as children turned violent and vengeful. Moscow became the beacon that many were drawn to, looking for a better life. Men left their families behind to seek migrant work while women left everything and everyone to make a new life for themselves. All too often they found abuse and humiliation. The more remarkable accounts that make up the vignettes the author includes in this work are that of a former NKVD worker and how he performed executions on a regular basis - he compared the "quotas" that were sent down from higher ups to the quotas that factories and workers were regularly issued and made to adhere to. Both served the state - one created goods needed by the state while the other destroyed perceived enemies of the state. Those recalling their time in Stalinist prisons and camps offered moving testimony and profound accounts. As the system and its cogs went through the motions, all too often victims were turned into executioners and executioners into victims - the previously mentioned NKVD worker was in turn arrested and served seven years. This is a text that will long stay with readers. It's less of a testimony for or against the former Soviet Union or its citizens than a look at the lives of people who have suffered trauma and tragedy in their lives due to events beyond their control.

197 of 215 people found the following review helpful. Interesting, but repetitive

By Thomas Reiter

I just finished this rather intense book and wanted to provide a review. If you are looking for a book about balalaikas and ballerinas, Tolstoy and troikas, this is not the book for you-- this is a book about the tsunami of misery and ruin which engulfed many inhabitants of the Soviet Union in the aftermath of its collapse--the inhabitants that didn't understand what happened to their old world, or how to live in the new one... Just for context, I lived in Moscow in the summer of 1992, summer of 1993, 1994-2000, and 2008-2016 and have traveled extensively in Russia, so I have quite a lot of experience with the place. Generally I found this book to be interesting, but too long, and too focused on negative topics. First, I can't really agree with reviewers that considered the interviews "false"; they seemed real enough to me. Second, the author has done a very good job of finding a particular type of Russian (namely, the inhabitants described in the first paragraph) and recording their stories--their thoughts, feelings, hopes, and disappointments--this is powerful stuff, and for the first couple of hundred pages, I found it quite interesting, but eventually the stories became repetitive, tedious, and very depressing. Third, somehow the author has managed to portray Russia and Russians, a very varied and complex place and people, in monotonous--very dark, depressing monotonous. For someone who does not know better, reading this book would leave the very strong impression that all Russians are miserable, pathetic, bitter wretches or psychopaths. Seriously, I've never read a book that mentions more suicides and murders--it seems like every couple of pages there is a new one. If you don't know much about Russia and hope to learn more about it, please don't start with this book, you'll come away with a very warped understanding! Again, not a false understanding, but only a very partial one... And I was fascinated to read how many Russians (all of them, as far as I could tell from the book) equated freedom with "salami" (actually,

as another review points out, "sausage"). Fourth, I guess the author's intent is to simply tell the narrators' stories rather than frame or comment on them in any way, but for me it would have been interesting for the author to have done more to "connect the dots" by tying the various narratives into some overarching themes, etc, rather than simply relating dozens of individual and unrelated stories. Also, it would have been good to know more about how the author found and selected her interview subjects--sometimes I wondered if she hadn't found most of them in some kind of asylum... Finally, best case, for someone hoping to understand today's Russia, this book will be of very limited utility--it focuses on the nineties, and the stories and narratives from those days are no longer particularly reflective of what's going on in Russia today, although they are helpful in understanding where Russia ended up where it is today. Instead of writing about the "last of the Soviets", I think that a more interesting book (and more useful someone trying to understand today's Russia and where it is going) would be about the "first of the post-Soviets"--either those who grew up under the Soviets but then successfully transformed under the new environment, or those who have grown up since the nineties and without any personal knowledge of the Soviet system at all. That would be a fascinating book, and if this author writes such a book, I would certainly read it.

21 of 24 people found the following review helpful. Literary non-fiction at its best

By Lionel D. Youst

I probably wouldn't be reading Svetlana Alexievich had she not been awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 2016. Her oeuvre is the creative assemblage of interviews with subjects who had experiences or observations of great moments in history. This is oral history, a form of non-fiction. The Nobel Prize in literature is usually awarded for novels, poetry, or drama. Only twice before in its 115 year history has it awarded the literature prize for works in non-fiction. The second prize, in 1902, went to Theodor Mommsen for his monumental *History of Rome*, thereby establishing an early precedent. The Nobel statute declares that Literature is to include all "writings that in form or content show literary value." This is meant to include philosophical, religious, scientific, and historical writings, provided they are distinguished by artistic excellence and high value of content. However, only once after 1902 had a non-fiction work been awarded the prize. In 1953 Winston Churchill was awarded the Literature prize for his monumental four-volume *History of the English Speaking Peoples*, and his other historical writings.. This year's prize to Svetlana Alexievich is, to my knowledge, the only other time the Nobel Prize for Literature was awarded for works of non-fiction. It is high time that the Nobel committee begins awarding such prizes more often.

In *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets*, Alexievich gives us an intensely creative oral history of post-Soviet Russia, something no one else has attempted as far as I know. We all remember Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* which first appeared in 1973. It relied largely on oral interviews and stunned the world with its indictment of the Stalin years and probably did much to help bring about the end of the Soviet Union. But what happened to the people of the new Russia? The old Soviets? If you want to know, you have to read *Secondhand Time* because I do not believe there is another source that even comes close to painting the picture. I read two of her previous books, *Zinky Boys*, and *Voices from Chernobyl*. Those two, along with *Secondhand Time* probably bring us closer to an understanding of the post-Soviet reality than any other source, literary or scientific.

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER • The magnum opus and latest work from Svetlana Alexievich, the 2015 winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature—a symphonic oral history about the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the emergence of a new Russia

NAMED ONE OF THE TEN BEST BOOKS OF THE YEAR BY THE WASHINGTON POST AND PUBLISHERS WEEKLY • **LOS ANGELES TIMES BOOK PRIZE WINNER** **NAMED ONE OF THE BEST BOOKS OF THE YEAR BY The New York Times** • **The Washington Post** • **The Boston Globe** • **The Wall Street Journal** • **NPR** • **Financial Times** • **Kirkus Reviews**

When the Swedish Academy awarded Svetlana Alexievich the Nobel Prize, it cited her for inventing “a new kind of literary genre,” describing her work as “a history of emotions—a history of the soul.” Alexievich’s distinctive documentary style, combining extended individual monologues with a collage of voices, records the stories of ordinary women and men who are rarely given the opportunity to speak, whose experiences are often lost in the official histories of the nation. In *Secondhand Time*, Alexievich chronicles the demise of communism. Everyday Russian citizens recount the past thirty years, showing us what life was like during the fall of the Soviet Union and what it’s like to live in the new Russia left in its wake. Through interviews spanning 1991 to 2012, Alexievich takes us behind the propaganda and contrived media accounts, giving us a panoramic portrait of contemporary Russia and Russians who still carry memories of oppression, terror, famine, massacres—but also of pride in their country, hope for the future, and a belief that everyone was working and fighting together to bring about a utopia. Here is an account of life in the aftermath of an idea so powerful it once dominated a third of the world. A magnificent tapestry of the sorrows and triumphs of the human spirit woven by a master, *Secondhand Time* tells the stories that together make up the true history of a nation. “Through the voices of those who confided in her,” *The Nation* writes, “Alexievich tells us about human nature, about our dreams, our choices, about good and evil—in a word, about ourselves.”

Praise for Svetlana Alexievich and *Secondhand Time*

“The nonfiction volume that has done the most to deepen the emotional understanding of Russia during and after the collapse of the Soviet Union of late is Svetlana Alexievich’s oral history *Secondhand Time*.”—David Remnick, *The New Yorker*

“Like the greatest works of fiction, *Secondhand Time* is a comprehensive and unflinching exploration of the human condition. . . . In its scope and wisdom, *Secondhand Time* is comparable to *War and Peace*.”—*The Wall*

Street Journal “Already hailed as a masterpiece across Europe, *Secondhand Time* is an intimate portrait of a country yearning for meaning after the sudden lurch from Communism to capitalism in the 1990s plunged it into existential crisis.”—The New York Times “This is the kind of history, otherwise almost unacknowledged by today’s dictatorships, that matters.”—The Christian Science Monitor “In this spellbinding book, Svetlana Alexievich orchestrates a rich symphony of Russian voices telling their stories of love and death, joy and sorrow, as they try to make sense of the twentieth century.”—J. M. Coetzee

Praise for Svetlana Alexievich and *Secondhand Time* “There are many worthwhile books on the post-Soviet period and Putin’s ascent. . . . But the nonfiction volume that has done the most to deepen the emotional understanding of Russia during and after the collapse of the Soviet Union of late is Svetlana Alexievich’s oral history *Secondhand Time*.”—David Remnick, *The New Yorker* “Like the greatest works of fiction, *Secondhand Time* is a comprehensive and unflinching exploration of the human condition. . . . Alexievich’s tools are different from those of a novelist, yet in its scope and wisdom, *Secondhand Time* is comparable to *War and Peace*.”—The Wall Street Journal “Already hailed as a masterpiece across Europe, *Secondhand Time* is an intimate portrait of a country yearning for meaning after the sudden lurch from Communism to capitalism in the 1990s plunged it into existential crisis. A series of monologues by people across the former Soviet empire, it is Tolstoyan in scope, driven by the idea that history is made not only by major players but also by ordinary people talking in their kitchens.”—The New York Times “The most ambitious Russian literary work of art of the century . . . There’s been nothing in Russian literature as great or personal or troubling as *Secondhand Time* since Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *The Gulag Archipelago*, nothing as necessary and overdue. . . . Alexievich’s witnesses are those who haven’t had a say. She shows us from these conversations, many of them coming at the confessional kitchen table of Russian apartments, that it’s powerful simply to be allowed to tell one’s own story. . . . This is the kind of history, otherwise almost unacknowledged by today’s dictatorships, that matters.”—The Christian Science Monitor “Alexievich’s masterpiece—not only for what it says about the fall of the Soviet Union but for what it suggests about the future of Russia and its former satellites. . . . Stylistically, *Secondhand Time*, like her other books, produces a mosaic of overlapping voices. . . . deepened by extraordinary stories of love and perseverance.”—Newsweek “A trove of emotions and memories, raw and powerful . . . [*Secondhand Time*] is one of the most vivid and incandescent accounts of [Soviet] society caught in the throes of change that anyone has yet attempted. . . . Alexievich stations herself at a crossroads of history and turns on her tape recorder. . . . [She] makes it feel intimate, as if you are sitting in the kitchen with the characters, sharing in their happiness and agony.”—The Washington Post “An enormous investigation of the generation that saw communism fall, [*Secondhand Time*] gives a staggeringly deep and plural picture of a people that has lost its place in history.”—San Francisco Chronicle “*Secondhand Time*, [Alexievich’s] latest book to be translated into English, is her most ambitious yet. . . . Its themes of hope and loss are universal. . . . A professional listener, Ms. Alexievich manages the feat of being present and invisible at the same time. . . . The result is always warm and human, however dark the content. Many of the people the author meets simply want to talk, sharing memories they had held on to for years or decades. With *Secondhand Time*, Ms. Alexievich has built a monument to these survivors of the collapse of the Soviet Union; a monument in words.”—The Economist “[Alexievich’s] writing is sui generis, blending the force of fact with the capaciousness of fiction to create a new, vital literary compound.”—The Nation “In *Secondhand Time*, the 2015 Nobel Laureate deftly orchestrates dozens of voices. . . . By letting her subjects keep their dignity, Alexievich has given us a fuller history of the fall of the Soviet Empire than we had before. By letting the vanquished speak, we might know better what, if anything, was actually won.”—Chicago Tribune “A compelling vision of the human condition.”—Associated Press “The Nobel Prize winner documents the last days of communism in the Soviet Union and the dawn of a new way of living in contemporary Russia. Through interviews with ordinary citizens, she finds the truth behind the headlines.”—Time “If you want to understand contemporary Russia, *Secondhand Time* is essential reading.”—Newsday “An epic chronicle of the fall of the Soviet Union and the emergence of a new Russia, in the unadorned voices of its ordinary citizens . . . Told in solos and choruses, her books have the rise and fall of a symphony.”—Vogue “Alexievich’s most ambitious project to date—a panoramic study of ordinary lives affected by the downfall of the Soviet system. . . . By careful listening and editing, she turns the transcripts of an interview into a spoken literature that carries all the truth and emotional power of a great novel.”—The New York of Books “For her polyphonic writings, a monument to suffering and courage in our time.”—Nobel Prize Committee “For the past thirty or forty years [Alexievich has] been busy mapping the Soviet and post-Soviet individual, but [her work is] not really about a history of events. It’s a history of emotions . . . a history of the soul.”—Sara Danius, permanent secretary of the Swedish Academy “In this spellbinding book, Svetlana Alexievich orchestrates a rich symphony of Russian voices telling their stories of love and death, joy and sorrow, as they try to make sense of the twentieth century, so tragic for their country.”—J. M. Coetzee “[Alexievich’s] books are woven from hundreds of interviews, in a hybrid form of reportage and oral history that has the quality of a documentary film on paper. But Alexievich is anything but a simple recorder and transcriber of found voices; she has a writerly voice of her own which emerges from the chorus she assembles, with great style and authority, and she shapes her investigations of Soviet and post-Soviet life and

death into epic dramatic chronicles as universally essential as Greek tragedies. . . . A mighty documentarian and a mighty artist.” —Philip Gourevitch “Alexievich’s voices are those of the people no one cares about, but the ones whose lives constitute the vast majority of what history actually is.”—Keith Gessen“Riveting . . . Other oral histories have relied on a blended structure whereby the individual stories form the supporting elements to the historians’ larger narrative; the grace and power of Alexievich’s work is the focus on intimate accounts, which set the stage for a more eloquent and nuanced investigation. A must for historians, lay readers, and anyone who enjoys well-curated personal narratives.”—Library Journal (starred review)“[Alexievich] documents the last days of the Soviet Union and the transition to capitalism in a soul-wrenching ‘oral history’ that reveals the very different sides of the Russian experience. . . . [Her] work turns Solzhenitsyn inside out and overpowers recent journalistic accounts of the era. . . . She spends hours recording conversations, sometimes returning years later, and always trying to go beyond the battered and distrusted communal pravda to seek the truths hidden within individuals.”—Publishers Weekly (starred review) “A rich kaleidoscope of voices from all regions of the former Soviet Union . . . profoundly significant literature as history.”—Kirkus s (starred review) “Absorbing and important.”—Booklist (starred review)About the AuthorSvetlana Alexievich was born in Ivano-Frankivsk, Ukraine, in 1948 and has spent most of her life in the Soviet Union and present-day Belarus, with prolonged periods of exile in Western Europe. Starting out as a journalist, she developed her own nonfiction genre, which gathers a chorus of voices to describe a specific historical moment. Her works include *War’s Unwomanly Face* (1985), *Last Witnesses* (1985), *Zinky Boys* (1990), *Voices from Chernobyl* (1997), and *Secondhand Time* (2013). She has won many international awards, including the 2015 Nobel Prize in Literature “for her polyphonic writings, a monument to suffering and courage in our time.”