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Secondhand Time: The Last Of The Soviets



Synopsis

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. 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 30 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 from 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."

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Having 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.

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.

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