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Remembering the (Post)War in Svetlana Alexievich and Ludmila Ulitskaya

This article examines two non-fictional texts composed from the privately communicated memories of historical witnesses to present an ethnography of Soviet childhood during the Second World War and the early post-war year: Svetlana Alexievich's *Last Witnesses. An Oral History of Children in World War* (1985) and Ludmila Ulitskaya's *Childhood 45–53. And Tomorrow There Will Be Happiness* (2013). How do these texts 'stage' post-war memories, given that they both draw on the sensation of dislocation generated by temporal chasms in the process of recreating the childhood memories of now-adult survivors? How do these texts establish a connection between the remembered experience and the process of remembering, particularly considering the epistemic split that arises not only between a child and an adult witness, but also between a child and his or her family members as they mediate the traumatic war experience? Finally, how do narrated memories forge a link between the remembered child and the remembering adult?

1. Introduction

In the post-Soviet Russia of the 2010s, a decade characterized by a deep crisis of symbolic order (Kukulin 2018), cultural and ideological disputes have often been transformed into battles over individual memory within the overarching politics of history. In this context, it is noteworthy that, for several consecutive years, novels exploring the Soviet past became a significant literary trend (Mikhail Shishkin, *The Light and the Dark* [Pis'movnik, 2010]); Sergei Lebedev, *Oblivion* [Predel zabvenii, 2011]), some even receiving prestigious literary awards (e.g.,

Zakhar Prilepin's *Abode* [Obitel'] in 2014, Guzel' Iakhina's *Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes* [Zuleikha otkryvaet glaza] in 2015, Evgenii Vodolazkin's *The Aviator* [Aviator] in 2016, and Maria Stepanova's *In Memory of Memory* [Pamiati pamiati] in 2017). Novels from the 2010s thematically centred around the Soviet past contain discrepancies in how they reflect on this historical legacy on levels that go beyond the surface content, reaching the temporal structures of narrative. Be it through staging and reflecting the workings of memory through the transformation of letters into an epistolary novel (*The Light and the Dark*), to cre-

ate mythopoetic circular time; or in the form of a diary (*The Aviator*) that creates an illusion of co-presence of past and present times; or through ‘magical historicism’ (Alexander Etkind), in which the traumatic past is depicted through grotesque ‘time out of joint’, such as in Lebedev’s *Oblivion*—in all these cases, the authors choose to make use, but also sense, of the Soviet past through multi-temporal levels where past, present, and future intermingle in complex and occasionally provocative ways.

At the most basic level, the rich temporal cartography of contemporary Russian and Russophone prose writing verifies the basic narratological convention that every story, in order to be narrated, requires a temporal framework. At the same time, temporal cartography may also be considered an anthropological-cultural category that archives and traces broad political and cultural splits within post-Soviet Russian society—by making time ‘speak our language,’ i.e., humanizing it by giving it a linguistic form (Kermode 1968: 44–45)—splits that are marked by a disruption, an elimination, or at least by a relocation of the relations between the past and the future, perhaps best exemplified by the perplexing tem-

poral pseudo-projection ‘forward to the dark past’ (the slogan of the ‘monstrations’ in Novosibirsk in 2013, organized by Artem Loskutov). The widespread popularity of literary reworkings of the violent Soviet past in Russian and Russophone literature throughout the 2010s echoes both the ‘obsession with the past’ (Etkind 2013: 5) and what Aleida Assmann has termed ‘the future eclipse’ (Assmann 2020: 5).¹ This paradigmatic shift of fo-

¹ A deteriorating sense of progress and growth, closely related to the aporias of historical knowledge, transcends the boundaries of post-Soviet Russia: this is a crucial aspect of global Western (or, at least, European) culture. Jean-Luc Nancy discusses the feeling of existing ‘beyond history’ and of the ‘suspension of history’, where narrative fiction represents a way of reclaiming history as ‘becoming and happening and [...] as sense, direction, and Idea’ (Nancy 1994: 155). Frank Kermode asserts that, following the Second World War, ‘we no longer inhabit a world with a historical tick that will undoubtedly culminate in a definitive tock’ (Kermode 1968: 64). In her analysis of time, Aleida Assmann repeatedly argues that ‘the future no longer serves as the Eldorado of our hopes and dreams, while at the same time any heady talk about progress has begun to sound more and more hollow’ (Assmann 2020: 4). These days, it is hard to disagree with her assertion that ‘the future is no longer much of a motivator in the arenas of politics, society, and the environment’ (Assmann 2020: 3–4): our expectations for the future have become ‘extremely modest’ (Ass-

cus from ‘the “shrinking” future to the “expanding” past’ (Lorenz 2014: 51) not only testifies to changes in the envisioning of possible futures, but also de-territorializes images of the past. In Chris Lorenz’s words, ‘[a]s the future lost its promise of progress, the past lost its fixed place at a safe distance from the present and its character as an object’ (Lorenz 2014: 57). In my research (Lugarić Vukas 2023a; Lugarić Vukas 2023b; Lugarić Vukas 2023c; Lugarić Vukas 2025), I explore a number of contemporary prose writings, written in Russian and published during the 2010s, focusing on their temporal foundations while considering them methodologically in terms both of local contingencies and global flows of knowledge production in memory studies.² My aim is to

mann 2020: 4) because today ‘we no longer automatically assume that change means change *for the better*’ (Assmann 2020: 4).

² In ‘Time and Space in the Long Twentieth Century,’ Chris Lorenz offers a three-part periodization of memory studies: first, the foundational period, identified with the work of Maurice Halbwachs on collective memory; then the memory-boom period, associated with Pierre Nora’s ‘sites of memory;’ and, finally, the present-day period of transnational, transcultural, and multidirectional memory, identified with the work of Michael Rothberg, Ann Rigney, Astrid Erll, Daniel Levy, Nathaniel

reflect on the insights gained from examining the specific commemoration strategies used

Sznaider, and Aleida and Jan Assmann (Lorenz 2020: 31–49). The last, contemporary phase of development is both a temporal and spatial turn in the sense that it is marked by a fundamental break with notions ‘of container space and container time’ (Lorenz 2020: 31). Contemporary memory scholars often emphasize that memory is a traveling concept in ‘relatively open multiscale spaces and in multidirectional times—and thus cannot unambiguously be located in one space or in one time, nor connected to one fixed identity’ (Lorenz 2020: 31–32). While approaching prose texts in this article through the lens of temporality, I am, of course, aware of the inseparability of spatial and temporal features of narrative (Mikhail Bakhtin’s *chronotope*), but I purposely focus on time because I am interested in probing the idea of its multidirectionality in the context of the post-Soviet Russian and Russophone novel of the 2010s, i.e., how time is framed within the experience of the collapse of future perspectives. In Lorenz’s words, ‘[m]ultidirectional time implies a pluralization of times because the past, present, and future are no longer conceived of as chronological, that is as sequential and as discrete points on a straight line. Rather, past, present, and future are conceived as a three-dimensional complex of intersecting, non-linear timelines, that according to Bruno Latour can better be visualized as a plate full of spaghetti than as the modern arrow of time’ (Lorenz 2020: 44). To that end, I approach narrative fiction in this analysis as a discourse ‘in which the objective and subjective dimensions of time can find their most unified treatments’ (Currie 2007: 76).

in post-Soviet Russia of the 2010s, often referred to in existing scholarship as ‘warped mourning’ (Etkind 2013) and ‘after memory’ (Schwartz et al. 2021: 1–20).

2. Remembering Childhood, or Why Time Matters?

In this article, I will examine two narratives derived from the privately communicated memories of wartime witnesses, which can be viewed as ethnographies of Soviet childhood during the Second World War and the early post-war years: Svetlana Alexievich’s *Last Witnesses. An Oral History of Children in World War* [Poslednie svideteli. Solo dlia detskogo golosa], first published in 1985 but significantly altered for later editions and presently part of a five-volume collection titled *Voices of Utopia* [Golosa utopii, 2013]³ and Ludmila Ulitskaya’s *Childhood 45–53. And Tomorrow There Will Be Happiness* [Detstvo 45–53. A zavtra budet schast’e, 2013].⁴ Alexievich’s book is a collection of memories pertaining to the Second World War as told by witnesses who were children at the time of the war. Sergei

Oushakine (2008) has noted that Alexievich’s book aligns with similar works that explore topics such as children of war, children in war, and children and war. This includes the novels *Son of the Regiment* [Syn Polka, 1944] by Valentin Kataev and *Ivan* (1957) by Vladimir Bogomolov, as well as Soviet films such as *The Fate of Man* [Sud'ba cheloveka, 1959] by Sergei Bondarchuk (based on Mikhail Sholokhov’s short story), *Ivan’s Childhood* [Ivanovo detstvo, 1962] by Andrei Tarkovskii, and *Come and See* [Idi i smotri, 1985] by Elem Klimov. The polyphonic structure of testimonies in *Last Witnesses* emphasizes—as suggested by the subtitle in Russian, ‘A solo for a child’s voice’—that discussing collective trauma in the context of the Second World War is problematic because ‘everyone searches for words for his own tragedy independently’ (Oushakine 2008), thereby rejecting—already at a conceptual level—the possibility of reifying individual memory within an official and collective politics of commemoration. Ulitskaya’s book, published in 2013, consists of letters sent at the invitation of the publishing house AST, in which Russian citizens were asked to recount their memories about the period circumscribed by two symbolically loaded

³ See Oushakine 2008.

⁴ All translations from Ulitskaya’s *Childhood 45–53* are my own, D.L.V..

chronological boundaries: 9 May 1945 (the date of the Great Victory in the Second World War) and 5 March 1953 (the date of Joseph Stalin's death). Both events were emotional peaks in Soviet Russian society, provoking a range of sentiments from the unmatched joyfulness of 1945 to the complexity of trauma caused by Stalin's death, and manifested in a broad spectrum of emotions: from deep sadness to—in the words of Dmitrii Prigov—'mourning enthusiasm' (cf. in Paperno 2009: 50).⁵ The title of Ulitskaya's book, *And Tomorrow There Will Be Happiness*, suggests that the immediate post-war period was characterized by an optimistic belief in the 'bright future' (*svetloe budushchee*) to come. Social and political life was dominated by an all-pervasive enthusiasm for vitally rebuilding the new on the ruins of the old. Given this widespread orientation toward the bright future, it was considered particularly inappropriate at the time to discuss the totalitarian aspects of the Soviet regime. The fact that the AST publishing house selected Ulitskaya as the

author and editor of roughly 150 letters divided into 18 thematic units is not surprising: the themes of familial ties, heritage, childhood, and memory often serve as the backbone of her literary works, and this book is also a logical extension of her overarching artistic style, both in its use of documentary material (*Daniel Stein, Interpreter* [Daniel' Shtain, perevodchik, 2006], *The Green Tent* [Zelënnii shatër, 2010], *Jacob's Ladder* [Lestnitsa Iakova, 2015]), and in terms of its thematic content.⁶

According to Marina Balina, 'in the 1990s and 2000s, autobiographic life-writing became the territory of intense negotiations between private and historical experiences. Debates about Soviet history supported by the opening of the state archives and resulting in the accessibility of public as well as personal documents, triggered a process of re-conceptualization of private experience into a *historical event*' (Balina 2014: 185; emphasis in original). Within this cultural-historical context, the collections of testimonies (in Alex-

⁵ The amount of tears shed after the news of Stalin's death was frequently an indicator of social demarcation between the community of 'our own' and that of 'the others' (Paperno 2009: 27).

⁶ The fact that individuals of diverse backgrounds and ages responded to the AST publishing house's invitation unambiguously indicates that the Second World War (or 'Great Patriotic War') belongs to cross-generational collective memory in present-day Russia.

ievich's book) and letters (in Ulitskaya's book) can be read as narratives that historicize the image of a child by fostering broad-minded thinking about childhood in an epistemic transition between reflecting on the past and facing the future, where childhood is not simply a period in one's life but 'a fundamental element in the artistic representation of the construction of the self' (Criveller et al. 2020: 5). Given that both works draw on the sensation of dislocation generated by temporal chasms in the process of recreating childhood memories of now-adult survivors, they are fruitful examples of creative ways, 'quasi-fictional' and 'in-between' (Emerson 2011: 276)⁷ to textually stage the memory of (post)war

times as it relates to the evolving self.⁸

According to Henry Jenkins, the prevailing myth of childhood innocence in contemporary culture "empties" the child of its own political agency and demands nothing—except, perhaps, its own innocence' (Jenkins 1998: 1–2). These images of 'normal' childhood, argues Chris Jenks, 'transcend both time and culture' (quoted in Ahlbeck et al. 2018: 1), a conception of childhood innocence which presumes that 'children exist in a space beyond, above, outside the political' (Jenkins 1998: 2). Moreover, '[t]he innocent child is caught somewhere over the rainbow—between nostalgia and utopian optimism, between the past and the future' (Jenkins 1998: 5). For my assessment of the temporal cartography of contemporary prose writing, it is important to note that childhood in the books

⁷ Drawing from Lidiia Ginzburg's *On Psychological Prose*, Emerson reminds us that 'human documents,' such as diaries, confessions, memoirs, and working notebooks, are 'quasi-fictional' and 'in-between' forms of textuality because they are 'not autonomous from life' (Emerson 2011: 276). Ginzburg's analysis, which is also applicable to my understanding of the letters in Ulitskaya's book and the testimonies in Alexievich's, similarly argues that these texts require 'self-distancing [*samootstranenie*] that permitted unprecedented access to the self while formalizing, and thus containing, the resultant pain and vulnerability' (276; emphasis in original).

⁸ In this research, 'self' is understood as an 'umbrella term under which more specific understandings of who one is can be subsumed', thus leading to 'a number of corresponding concepts, especially "personality", "I", "authenticity", and "autonomy"' (Quante et al. 2019: 390). Correspondences notwithstanding, however, in this article 'self' corresponds to the narrative account, thus highlighting the idea 'that a person's self is constituted by the stories we tell about who a person is' (Quante et al. 2019: 390).

of Alexievich and Ulitskaya is decidedly not outside of time, insofar as the temporal dimension of the narrated histories is already present in the books' titles.⁹ At the same time, these two works show that childhood is subject to the same historical shifts and institutional forces that shape adult human experiences of war and of post-war periods, as also suggest that an essentially temporal notion of change or development is a key metaphor that renders accessible and intelligible not only historical times, but also individual childhoods (Jenks 1996: 36).

Therefore, despite frequent claims about lost childhood,¹⁰

⁹ Moreover, Ulitskaya's opening words, 'We remember together...' [Vspominaem vmeste...], draw attention to the mysterious and cryptic nature of time, bestowing an overarching philosophical tone on the book: 'Neither history nor geography have a moral dimension. Human beings bring it into play. Sometimes we speak of "violent times". But all times are violent in their own way. They are interesting in their own way. Time shapes certain human characteristics, but what defines the character of a particular era? That is an unsolvable question!' (Ulitskaya 2013: 5).

¹⁰ 'I grew up without mama ... I've never remembered myself as a child ...' (Alexievich 2019: 94); 'I'm a man without a childhood. Instead of a childhood, I have the war' (Alexievich 2019: 67); 'Were we really children? By the age of

both books are packed with numerous examples showing that the notion of a development does not simply represent a 'natural,' innate process. For Alexievich's interlocutors and the authors of the letters in Ulitskaya's book, development is achieved by narrative references to a socially and culturally constructed sense of change over time, which proves, on one hand, that 'the child's "becoming" is dependent upon the reference points or normative structures made conventional within the adults' world' (Jenks 1996: 40), and, on the other hand, that temporal coordinates are deployed to configure and structure these dynamic developments. Cases in point include this testimony from *Last Witness*: 'Before the war I liked it when Papa told us fairy tales. He knew many fairy tales and told them well. After the war I no longer wanted to read fairy tales ...' (Alexievich 2019: 126); or: 'During the war we played the game of "war". When we were tired of playing "Whites and Reds" or "Chapaev", we played "Russians and Germans". We fought. Took prisoners. Shot them. Put on soldiers' helmets, our own and German ones.

ten or eleven, we were men and women ...' (Alexievich 2019: 496).

Helmets were scattered everywhere—in the woods, in the fields. Nobody wanted to be a German, we even squabbled over it. We played in actual dugouts and trenches. We fought with sticks, or in hand-to-hand combat. Our mothers scolded us ... That surprised us, because earlier ... before the war ... they didn't scold us for this ...' (Alexievich 2019: 86–87). In these examples, temporal markers such as 'before,' 'after' and 'during,' as well as the use of past tense, illustrate that the narrated event has a perplexing chronological structure in which one time (that of narration) resides inside another (that of an event recalled). To be more specific, temporal markers, including tenses and indexical allusions to time, express dynamic and ever-varying connections that link the time of the utterance to the time of the event that is being addressed. In this sense, temporal markers do not merely locate remembered events within chronological time. Rather, they produce the narrative continuity through which fragmented recollections become autobiographical memory.

By refusing to conceptualize past events through a stillness of time, the witnesses in Alexievich's and Ulitskaya's works

simultaneously reject the presentation of childhood as a perspectiveless period in one's life, despite war and post-war conditions. They also decisively challenge the conventional assumption that childhood memories are necessarily happy, as all of them draw attention to a temporal fissure articulated through the antonymic adverbs 'before' and 'after,' which shape the overall tone of these testimonies. Moreover, the embeddedness, fixedness and rootedness of narrated events in various representations of time – found in almost all other testimonies and letters ('by the age of ten or eleven,' 'before the war ... after the war...', 'earlier,' 'just about,' 'decades have passed,' etc.) clearly signify that images of the past are for the most part constructed rather than simply retrieved from memory. This shows as Mark Currie has claimed by building on Martin Heidegger's notions of time [*Zeit*] and temporality [*Zeitlichkeit*], that 'time is not something which exists in the world and is then reflected in the human mind, but rather something which arises from human being [*Dasein*] and is then projected onto the world' (Currie 2007: 51–52). Although it is possible to claim that the arbitrariness and conventional nature of the tem-

poral structures of narrative reduce the authenticity of stories narrated, it is also possible to resolve this dispute in the following manner: 'the temporal self-distance of retrospect is a lie which reveals the truth, and this renders the truth a matter of temporality rather than simple presence' (Currie 2007: 64). Reclaiming one's past requires playing with or weighing the variability of temporal experience and other sources of temporal judgements such as temporal schemata and landmark events (Rubin 1995: 153) so that the time of an event recalled corresponds to its place, its location in a commonly shared calendar,¹¹ in socially patterned time periods¹² and idiosyncratic reference points,¹³ all of which

have specific purposes, some of which I have already addressed, while others will be addressed in the remainder of this analysis.

The importance of these temporal markers extends beyond the mere dating of remembered events because they also provide the narrative framework through which fragmented childhood experiences are integrated into autobiographical memory. According to Robyn Fivush and Katherine Nelson, 'children begin to develop the idea of a continuous self, a self that exists through time' (Fivush et al. 2004: 575) from a specific age (approximately age four, when they begin to develop a temporal sense of self). Statements about time are therefore crucial for understanding both how now-adult survivors reflect on experiences of temporal dislocation, and how they forge a link between the remembered child self and the remembering adult self. To that end, I propose that these temporal frameworks organize early fragmentary and episodic memories into autobiographical ones, while also mak-

¹¹ For instance, by mentioning the exact day, month, or a year: 'First candies' ('Pervie konfeti'): 'It was in 1946. I mention this date because it makes it easier to understand why I tasted my first piece of candy so late: I was born shortly before the war with the fascists, and during the war, there were no candies...' (Ulitskaya 2013: 84).

¹² 'I remember winter, cold winter. In winter our grandfather was killed' (Alexievich 2019: 254).

¹³ 'I'll tell you about the smell ... How war smells ... Before the war I finished sixth grade. At school the rule was that beginning from the fourth grade there were final exams. And so we passed the last exam. It was June, and the months of May and June in 1941 were cold. Li-

lacs usually blossom sometime in May, but that year they blossomed in mid-June. The beginning of the war is always associated in my mind with the smell of lilacs. And of bird cherry. For me these trees always smell of war...' (Alexievich 2019: 28–29).

ing possible the phenomenon known in memory studies as telescoping.

This distinction is crucial because very young children possess episodic, rather than autobiographical memory (Nelson 1993: 8). Consequently, many of the earliest memories recorded in both books appear as isolated fragments rather than coherent life narratives. For instance, 'Everything gets stamped in a child's memory like in a photo album. As separate snapshots...' (Alexievich 2019: 235); 'Does a three-year-old child remember anything? I'll tell you ... I remember three or four images very clearly' (Alexievich 2019: 399); 'If something has stayed in my memory, it's like a big family photograph' (Alexievich 2019: 457). While Alexievich's interlocutors frequently make statements that express their own epistemic self-doubt (hypothesized in Freud's concept of 'childhood amnesia,' which refers to adults' incapacity to recall events that happened before the ages of three or four, with the first two years of life suggesting 'a developing ability to recall events, but as yet no sense of a self remembering a specific point in the past, or a past memory being related to current conceptions of self in a continuous self-narrative' [Fivush et al. 2004:

574]), numerous testimonials in both books also offer proofs that, to quote Fivush and Nelson, 'there is a "barrier" that needs to be overcome, and that once this barrier is crossed, autobiographical memories are possible' (Fivush et al. 2004: 573). I propose that passing through this barrier is made possible by temporal settings, thus proving that time and mind are not independent entities, but that an account of time-consciousness, in the words of Mark Currie, becomes 'a mode of self-consciousness' (Currie 2007: 13). The testimony titled 'In the cemetery the dead lay above ground... As if they'd been killed again...' is particularly telling in this regard. It begins with the hesitant words of Vania Titov, who was five at the beginning of the war: 'As I remember it... I remember separate glimpses...' (Alexievich 2019: 85), but proceeds with more self-reliance when the narrator supersedes the individual 'I' with the collective 'we.' 'There was a bombardment,' he writes, 'and we hid in the garden behind the old apple trees. All five of us. I had four brothers, the oldest one was ten' (Alexievich 2019: 86); 'When the German soldiers came to our cottage, we hid on the stove. Under some old rags. We lay with our eyes closed. From fear'

(Alexievich 2019: 86), and so on. This example demonstrates that episodic memories become autobiographical not simply because they are recalled, but because they are narratively embedded within temporal and familial frameworks. This is especially true when an episodic recollection of war narrated from the perspective of the singular 'I' ('I remember separate glimpses') intersects with the experiences of other family members, so that the embeddedness of a narrative 'I' within the family story enables the narrative self to be framed by it. At the same time, the act of redirecting attention to tell-tale marks of temporal continuity between personal life stories and those of the community (his/her family) facilitates a belief in the continuity of identity. Thus, episodic memory assists in creating a structured life narrative (Fivush et al. 2004: 574) by reinforcing the idea that the present self can establish direct contact with the childhood self of the past. On the one hand, this continuity is enabled by the social framework of memory – to recall Maurice Halbwachs, although it is an individual who remembers, one always does so within the context of the group to which one belongs, making remembrance itself a culturally and social-

ly variable activity (Halbwachs 1992). On the other hand, it is reinforced by psychological factors, most notably familiarity. As claimed by Douglas Hermann, one remembers things more clearly when the degree of familiarity is high (Hermann 1993). It is thus not surprising that one of Alexievich's interlocutors attests that: 'I wanted to remember the spot, but how could I remember it if everything around me was unfamiliar?' (Alexievich 2019: 200–01). The aforementioned testimony, 'In the cemetery the dead lay above ground ... As if they'd been killed again...', wherein the transformation of 'I' into 'we' enables the chaining of an episodic memory to a coherent narrative, proves that the emergence of autobiographical memory necessitates different ways both of ordering time, including the ordering of the sequence of time within the event recalled, and then of attaching the narrated event to a specific time in the past. The employment of temporal framings not only enables the creation of a personal past, but also authorizes the continuity between the remembered child and the remembering adult, assuring witnesses that the present self genuinely belongs to the narrated past. For many of Alexievich's and Ulitskaya's interlocutors,

this is of utmost importance on the most basic, existential level since, as numerous testimonies confirm, many forgot their own names and surnames during the war, which, for them, then became 'evidence of a failed life, a sign of the absence of some fundamental, original point of reference' (Oushakine 2008).

Within this imperative to construct a continuous self, namely, a self that exists through time, that has a beginning and a direction, it is possible to describe the telescoping phenomenon in which estimates of dates are moved from the actual date of events toward the present so that time seems compressed, as if viewed through a telescope (Rubin 1995: 131). In the works analysed here, the phenomenon of telescoping is often present in memories of childhood and found in sentences packed with ellipses or rhetorical questions, suggesting the inability of witnesses to accurately frame the time and duration of recalled experience, such as: 'This horror is still lodged in my memory...' (Alexievich 2019: 117); 'Sometimes it's very vivid... It all comes back to me...' (Alexievich 2019: 122); or 'Decades have passed, and I'm still wondering: am I alive?!' (Alexievich 2019: 228). A more complex example of telescoping can be found in the let-

ter entitled 'On Marusia' [Pro Marusiu] in Ulitskaya's book, in which the witness regrets her behaviour towards a poor classmate who lost both of her parents in the war and ultimately finishes her letter with a 'telescopic' conclusion narrated in the present tense: 'Marusia, you can't hear me, but my whole life you stand before my eyes with your pigtails, your dress... You have probably experienced a lot of grief, poverty and humiliation in your adult life. Do you remember me and, if you do, have you forgiven me? I'm sorry, Marusia' (Ulitskaya 2013: 259). Although throughout Alexievich's and Ulitskaya's books internal referentiality is performed through various forms to emphasize 'the communicative conditionality of memories' (Jan Assmann in Schaser 2019: 344), in this example it is performed through telescoping to an absent yet paradoxically present 'you' (indicated by an abrupt switch from past to present tense), thus bridging the temporal chasms between the past and the present and creating a space to articulate an ethical relation to the other in the present, while indicating that the mirror constituted by someone else's eyes (whether 'yours' or 'ours') is a prerequisite for constructing and producing a narrative 'I.' In

terms of Bakhtin's philosophical accounts of dialogism, this process can be characterized as 'not me looking out on the world with my own eyes... [but] out of my eyes, someone else's eyes gaze forth' (cf. Emerson 2011: 277), illustrating that autobiographical memory 'depends not only on an awareness of self in the past, but also on an awareness of others with whom one has shared the past' (Fivush et al. 2004: 575). Through these interpersonal and polyphonic acts of commemoration, memory becomes a site of opportunity for mourning, rather than something that atomizes both the individual and the collective in the triumphalist narrative surrounding the Second World War that still prevails in post-Soviet Russia. These varieties of memory work can create empathy and go beyond hegemonic 'history-making' policies by supporting non-canonical and non-hegemonic forms of cultural imagination as well as new forms of knowledge that are ethically and socially engaged.

3. Conclusion

The micro-histories of the Second World War presented both in Alexievich's *Last Witnesses* and Ulitskaya's *Childhood* 45–53 are filtered through a child's

sensibility, demonstrating that children do not live in a space and time that is beyond, above, or outside the political. Temporal indices confirm that textualization and narrativization are the only ways to access the material reality of the past, even though the presented testimonies and letters initially appear to be largely unmediated recollections of past experience. It is widely acknowledged that nothing seems more essential to (auto)biography than time, but in the analysis of children's memories of the past, time assumes even greater importance because temporal ordering makes autobiographical memory narratively possible. Without such ordering children would likely remain silent witnesses of the past, 'inherently bifurcated and fragmented' (Oushakine 2008). Children become authentic witnesses when the rhythm and direction of their war and post-war experiences are structured, viewed through a temporal lens, and temporally ordered. Following Heather D. DeHaan (DeHaan 2025), these narratives may be seen as examples of chronopolitics, insofar as the authenticity of any given witness is not an inherent built-in quality, but rather produced through a set of cultural (in this case time-related) conventions, while the

temporality of a narrated event becomes 'a kind of spiralling movement in which the fictional representation of time and the lived experience of time constantly modify each other' (Currie 2007: 94).

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