I LOVE LIFE IN ITS LIVING FORM, life that’s found on the street, in human conversations, shouts, and moans. That sort of life is genuine, not yet shaped by someone else’s ideas or talents.

This probably comes from my childhood. My parents were village teachers and there were always plenty of books at home. But in the evenings, I was drawn away from books to the benches outside where the women of the village gathered. It was the post-war period, when young boys were still getting themselves blown up in the forest by German and partisan mines. As far as I remember, only women lived in the village. No men had returned from the war. In the evenings, after milking the cows and finishing up the housework, the women would sit outside and talk about life and death. They talked about the war: how they saw their loved ones off, how they waited for them. How they believed the gypsy women who promised them miracles. It seems to me that I learned everything there was to know about love from their stories. Their stories affected me more than books. Life seemed mysterious and frightening.

It took me a long time to find a genre that corresponded to the way I viewed the world… to the way my eyes saw and ears heard… a genre that corresponded to my memory.

I chose the genre of the human voice. In my books, ordinary people, the ones we still refer to as the “little men” or women, talk about themselves. I discover my books on the street, I hear them outdoors. Sometimes I spend an entire day with one person. It’s important to catch words in flight, as they’re born. It’s important not to miss the conversational part of life, which we often neglect, dismiss as unimportant, leaving it to disappear in the bustle of life, in the darkness of time. It seems surprising that this could be literature. But I want to make every bit of our life into literature. Including ordinary, everyday words.

For over 30 years I chronicled the “Red Empire.” This unprecedented communist project spanned a vast territory and affected an enormous number of people—over 200 million. The Russian Bolsheviks attempted to remake man, ancient Adam, into a new type of human
being—*Homo sovieticus*. The “Red Man” that I write about is a creation of the Soviet idea, the builder of communism, as he called himself. This chronicle comprises five books, but they are really one book about the history of the Russian-Soviet soul. They cover a period of almost one hundred years and several generations. I managed to speak to people who had seen Lenin and Stalin, who did time in Stalinist labor camps, but believed in Stalin, cherished their party membership cards, those little red booklets with the leaders’ profiles embossed on the cover. I remember an old woman who seemed to me to have risen from the dead. She was a communist who had spent 17 years—her entire sentence—in a distant corner of Siberia and miraculously survived. And yet she threatened to denounce me to the KGB because I was slandering the great leader and a great, heroic era. Communism was their religion.

For most of my life I lived among them, I lived the same life. My father was one of them; he believed in the party until the end, and asked that his party card be buried with him. This was the last generation to be mortally infected with communism. Bewitched by utopia.

We are their children, but we don’t understand them. The protagonists of my more recent books are different. They talked about fighting in Afghanistan but didn’t understand what cause they were supposed to be dying for; they talked about shoveling melted graphite off the roof of the Chernobyl reactor, doing work that should be done by robots. About the collapse of the mighty Red Empire, and how they were left behind, disoriented in this new world.

I am interested in domestic socialism, not heroic, pompous, public displays, but the socialism that lives in human souls. I reduce the great and grand to human scale. I am a historian of the soul. For me, feelings are also documents. I study missing history, the things that history usually overlooks. History is often arrogant, and dismissive of what is small and human. A whole choir sounds in each of my books, but the individual human voice can always be heard. For me, human beings exist simultaneously in two worlds—in a specific time, and in the universe, the eternal. I spent five to seven years writing each book, and in each case recorded somewhere between 500 and 700 people of different ages and different professions—because the woman who fired a machine gun saw one war,
and the woman piloting a bomber may not have seen a single person die during the war, she only saw the sky. The machine gunner talked about hand-to-hand combat, when a human isn’t human anymore, just an animal who wants to live, a creature that slices and stabs—at the eyes, the heart, the stomach....

I gather my books from hundreds of details, nuances, shades, and tints. Sometimes an entire day of conversation produces only a single phrase. But what a phrase! “I was so little when I left for the front that I got taller during the war.” Once I sat for four hours with a woman who was a submachine gunner during the war, and all I heard from her were banal newspaper platitudes: “The war began, and we Soviet girls rushed to the front along with the men. That’s how the motherland raised us.” I wanted to leave the house, I couldn’t see how I could possibly break through the clichés. The propaganda. The male canon. Often, the women I spoke to wanted to tell their stories like men. But I was looking for specifics, for smells and subtleties, the kinds of things that distinguish a woman’s war from a man’s. And then, when I was putting on my coat, just about ready to leave, the same woman said: “Stay a bit longer. Let me tell you...you could never imagine how frightening it is to die at dawn. The birds are singing, it’s quiet, and in a few minutes you’ll get the order: ‘Fire!’ The grass is so clean, the air is so pure, but you have to die.” This is where literature begins. And later, at the end of the conversation she told me: “After the battle we would walk through the fields and look for the living—maybe someone had survived somehow. Soldiers were scattered across the trampled wheat like potatoes, they just stared at the sky—Germans, and our soldiers, too. They were all so young, handsome. We felt sorry for all of them.”

It was never my goal to put together a collection of horror stories, to overwhelm the reader. I was collecting the human. Dostoevsky asked the question: “How much of the human is there in a human being?” How can the human in this human being be protected? That’s the question I’m looking to answer. I collect the human spirit. You may say: it’s an ephemeral thing, too elusive. But art attempts to capture it. And every era has its own answers. It takes a long time and a great deal of work to put together an image
of a period from different stories. What kind of people lived at this time? What did they believe in? What were their fears? Their superstitions? Their perplexed speculations about the meaning of life? I always asked everyone who fought: how can a person live with the idea that he has the right to kill another human being? To kill and not to go mad? People died too easily and killed too easily for grand ideas. In order to hear something new, you have to ask in a new way. I have to be interesting to the person. I, too, have to tear myself away from the predatory clutches of my time, to stand at least a little bit to the side.

All of my books have had a hard time. Some, like War’s Unwomanly Face, weren’t published for many years. Others were taken to court in trials presided over by actual judges. Boys in Zinc was the subject of a lawsuit. When I saw Natasha M. in the courtroom, I was very surprised. I went up to her: “Why are you here, Natasha?” I asked. “You wanted me to write the whole truth, and I wrote it.” I remember her son’s small coffin, which could barely fit in the nine square meters of the barracks. She sat next to it, mad with grief, alternately sobbing quietly or shouting: “The coffin is so small, and you were so big, almost two meters tall; is that you in there, son? Answer your mama.” She told me that they hadn’t been able to find any valuables in the house in order to buy her son out of the war. “I would have given everything, I would have paid, like others did, but I didn’t even have a pair of gold earrings. I want you to write that my son was a carpenter,” she said, crying. “He was drafted into the army and on the very first day he was sent to renovate the generals’ dachas, not for training. They didn’t even teach him how to shoot. He was killed the first month.” “What are you doing here, Natasha?” I couldn’t believe it. “I wanted my son to be a hero, and you wrote that he was a killer. You wrote about how they killed. . . .” What could I reply, if even all the suffering she endured hadn’t made her free? We weren’t just slaves, we were slavery’s romantics.

War’s Unwomanly Face wasn’t published for three years: I was accused of “naturalism,” and “pacifism.” The censors were particularly indignant about an episode describing 200 young women soldiers marching. The men marching behind them tried not to look down at the sand, where there were drops of blood. It was that time of the month for many of the women, and they needed cotton, or something, but the Soviet army didn’t issue those sorts of things. The women were ashamed. When they reached
a ford crossing a river, the Germans began bombing. The men all hid, but the women rushed into the water to wash themselves—making an excellent target. Almost all of them were shot from the air. “Why are you bringing biology into it? You should be describing the heroism!” the censor shouted at me. I tried to argue that humans are made up of many things, including biology. I’m interested in the body as a connection between nature and history. Ideals can’t be made of plaster, like monuments. In the end, that page was cut out of the first edition. I was able to reinstate it only 10 years later. During perestroika. The censor even deleted the following scene: I asked a woman, a former sniper, what she took to the war with her. Her answer: “A suitcase full of candy. I spent my entire last paycheck buying chocolates.” And we laughed. “You call this history…these candies?” The censor was angry. “Yes, it’s history,” I replied. “These kinds of details make a huge impression.”

Sometimes I am reproached because the people in my books are said to speak too beautifully. In love, and in contact with death, people always speak beautifully. At these moments they transcend their ordinary selves, they rise up on tiptoe. That is the kind of person I keep watch for. I look out for life, for people who have been shaken to the core by life. By the everyday. In telling his own story, a person creates; he doesn’t copy reality, he creates. Memories are living creatures. People put their entire lives into their memories: what they read, what they thought about, whether they were happy or not. Documents evolve along with the human soul; it would be naive to think that they represent canonical knowledge, something immobile that is mechanically transferred from one time to another. After perestroika many of my subjects added entire pages to their stories, they became freer and looked into themselves more profoundly. Profoundly, and with greater courage. I would receive letters saying: “At the time I was afraid... You know how dangerous it was to talk about Stalin. We couldn’t even tell the whole truth about the war. But now I’ve decided to write.”

I, too, have changed over the years. I know more about people and have better intuition. Feelings are not a simple, linear, naked thing. A document can tell a story, elevate everything. But it has always tormented me that the truth doesn’t fit into one heart or mind, that truth is so fragmented, there is a lot of it, and it’s scattered about the world. I don’t agree
when people tell me that documents cannot tell us anything about the personal, the sacred. They are difficult subjects to write about, but it can be done. Who will believe a person without this... without the heart?

My subjects would often say things like: “I can tell you, because you’re Soviet, and only a Soviet person can understand another Soviet person—you know what I mean.” The Russian soul is an enigma. We lived together in a country where we were taught to die beginning in childhood. We learned death and dying. We weren’t taught that humans are born for happiness, or love, it was drilled into us that humans exist in order to give of themselves, in order to burn, to sacrifice. We were taught to love people with weapons.

I have traveled this road for decades. I didn’t always have the strength for it. Human beings have delighted me and frightened me. If I had grown up in another country, I couldn’t have followed this path. Evil is merciless, you have to be vaccinated against it. We grew up among executioners and victims. Even if our parents were afraid and didn’t tell us everything—and most of the time they didn’t tell us anything at all—still, the very air we breathed was poisoned. Evil always kept its eye on us.

My first book, *War’s Unwomanly Face*, is about war as it was seen and described by women. Why war? Because war has always been at the center of our lives. We are people of war. We have either been fighting or preparing to fight. Everything we know about the war we know from a “male voice.” We are always captive to male ideas and the male experience of war. Male words. When women tell stories, they tend to adapt to the male canon, to describe men’s war, not women’s. In my journalistic travels I often met women serving in the military. If I was able to pry them away from clichés, the monstrous grimace of the mysterious could be glimpsed through their stories. It was a totally new kind of text. When women spoke there was little or none of the usual narrative: one group of people heroically kills another group of people and declares victory. Or defeat. A little about the kinds of weapons and which generals were present. Women’s stories are different and they talk about different things. They have their own colors, space, and lighting. Their own words. There aren’t any heroes or officially sanctified heroic exploits, there are just people, people who are engaged in the human business of inhumanity. And everything living suffers, not only people: birds, trees, animals.... They suf-
fer without words, which is even more terrible. The grandiose, predatory world of war was revealed to me through their stories.

How can a person live through history and write about it at the same time? You can’t grab just any old bit of life or existential “dirt” by the collar and drag it into a book. Into history. You have to transcend the time and “seize the spirit.”

Men are hostages to the culture of war, but women are freer. Women’s stories always contain the idea that when all is said and done, war is about killing. It’s always about killing, no matter what.

I found texts, literature, everywhere. In city apartments and village huts, on the street, in the train. I learned how to listen, how to turn myself into one big ear.

After War’s Unwomanly Face, I decided to follow the times. To follow human beings: how has this man changed, what is happening to this woman? What is happening to them, that is, to us? The story of one person is fate; the story of hundreds of people is history.

Boys in Zinc began with one little girl. I couldn’t forget her. In the municipal cemetery in Minsk they were burying officers brought back from Afghanistan in zinc coffins. There were grandiose, combative speeches, wreaths…. A little girl tore away from the grownup’s hand like a bird and cried out: “Papa! Papa! I drew lots of boats for you, just like you asked. Where are you?”

That is when I realized I had to go to Afghanistan, even though I thought that I could never write about war again. On television they were showing our troops planting trees and building houses in Afghanistan…. They talked about international obligations, state interests.

Finally, there I was, in the middle of the war….

The first time I drove along the streets of Kabul, I saw familiar posters: “Communism—is our bright future,” “Kabul—is a city of the world,” “The people and party are united!” It felt like I was in Minsk, not in Kabul.

Then, for the first time, I saw a person who had been killed. Not by lightning, not by the elements, but by another person.

I saw “Grad” rockets turn clay villages into plowed fields. I visited an endless Afghan cemetery, where an old Afghan woman howled like a wounded creature. It reminded me of the village near Minsk when they brought
the zinc coffin into the house and the mother howled in the very same way. It wasn’t a human cry and it wasn’t the cry of an animal…

My first thought was: how will I ever find words for this? What sustained my hope? Witnesses. Only the words of witness were equal to what I saw and what I wanted to write about. Today, I see the witness as the main protagonist in literature. People say to me: “Well, you know, memories, recollections—that’s not history and not literature either. It’s just life, rubbish that the artist hasn’t polished. It’s the raw material of conversation, just chitchat.” But I see things differently. It is there, in the live human voice, in the live reflection of reality, that the mystery of our presence is hidden, and the insurmountable tragedy of life is laid bare. Life’s chaos and passion. Its singularity and inscrutability. Shouts and sobs can’t be polished, or the main thing will be neither the tears nor shouts, but the polish.

I am building temples from our feelings…our desires and disappointments. Our reveries. From things that should not be allowed to disappear.

Before Afghanistan, I believed that we were building socialism with a human face. That is what my father taught me. I returned from Afghanistan free of all illusions. “Forgive me father,” I said when I arrived home, “you raised me to believe in communist ideals, but once you’ve seen our soldiers killing people they don’t know in a foreign land, all those ideals turn to dust.” My father cried.

Life itself is unimaginably artistic all on its own. As cruel as this may sound—human suffering is especially artistic. This the dark side of art. I am always dealing with materials that lead right to the edge of the impossible. Where you are one on one with reality.

I spent 10 years writing the book about Chernobyl. After that experience, I can truly say that I don’t write my books, I live through them.

Chernobyl was a sudden leap into a new reality. What happened there surpassed not only our knowledge, but our imagination. Everyone I talked to said the same thing: “I’ve never seen anything like it….” “I’ve never read about anything like this….” “I’ve never seen this in any film….” “No one has ever told me about anything like this.” Everything was just as it had been, but the world had changed completely, including our knowledge about the horrors of war. In Chernobyl the trees were blooming, everything was growing, the birds were flying, but people could feel
that death was present everywhere. Unseen, unheard. Death with a new countenance. The past was powerless to help us with any of it.

I went to Chernobyl. What I saw was cause for silence. People looked dazed, almost mad. We watched the top layer of contaminated earth being cut away and buried in special ditches. Earth was being buried in the earth. Soldiers washed the roads, the houses, the trees, the firewood…. And they buried, buried, buried. They buried things, eggs, milk, contaminated animals that had been shot. In the newspapers, information about Chernobyl consisted entirely of military words: explosions, heroes, soldiers, evacuation. Military equipment was headed for Chernobyl, carrying soldiers with automatic weapons. The system worked as it was supposed to in extreme circumstances: lots of machines and lots of soldiers. But a soldier with an automatic weapon was tragic in this new world. The only thing he could do was absorb huge doses of radiation and die when back at home. People were used to the idea of atomic war, but not atomic peace. They didn’t yet realize that the atoms of war and peace are colleagues, they kill in exactly the same way.

I remember the evacuation of a village: the people got onto buses, but the dogs and cats ran loose, they were left behind. Humans saved only themselves. An old woman stood next to an old house, holding an icon, and refused to get on the bus. When she saw me, she came over and said: “I know what war looks like, but here the sun is shining, everything’s in bloom, I even saw a mouse today. Why should I leave my cottage? How could this be war?” “Yes, this is war. This is probably how the wars of the future will begin,” I thought. “Yes, it’s war. A different kind of war, unknown to us.”

An old beekeeper told me that the bees hadn’t left their hives for a week, and the fishermen remembered that they couldn’t find any worms, they had all gone deep into the earth. Bees, worms, and insects knew something that people didn’t.

I realized that I didn’t have any instruments, I didn’t know how to approach the subject. The event was still outside of our culture. At the time I heard: “We’re Belarussians—black boxes recording information for the future.”

All around me I heard completely unknown texts. For example, the wife of a fireman who helped to extinguish the fire
on the roof of the reactor the first night kept repeating what the doctors told her: “You can’t get close to your husband, you can’t touch him or kiss him. He has severe radiation poisoning.” The doctors wouldn’t let her see him. “He isn’t your beloved husband anymore,” they said, “he’s an object requiring to decontamination.” You couldn’t see radiation, your eyes weren’t any help; it didn’t have a smell, you couldn’t touch it, you couldn’t hear it. All our faculties: eyes, ears, fingers… nothing was of any use. New words were needed, and none were to be found.

Not far from the reactor I saw village boys on bicycles. They had come in the evening to look at the fire, to gaze at the dark pink glow emitted by the smoking reactor. The sky really was beautiful. Beauty and death were shoulder to shoulder. But we didn’t know it yet.

The churches were full of people, but the only thing they found there was consolation. However, in order to survive, you have to understand. How can you resist something you don’t know? People became philosophers. Faced with this mystery each person was left alone with himself. Chernobyl condemned each of us to endless solitude. Evil took place on such a scale that we surpassed our limits, but still couldn’t understand it. Consciousness capitulated, science capitulated. But the subconscious began to work. People were afraid of particular monsters, they told stories of children with five heads, of headless, wingless birds…. They scared each other with fantasies: thousands of corpses are being buried in secret locations….

Belarus is an archaic, agrarian country. The peasants live close to nature. Simple tools are still used on the land: the ax, shovel, plow. What did I discover? Scholars, politicians, and the military were thoroughly baffled, but the old country folks’ image of the world wasn’t disturbed. I don’t know what helped them. Perhaps it was their acceptance of the idea that they could disappear along with nature. “Nothing like this ever happened in Chekhov or Tolstoy,” one teacher told me. Everyone sought his or her own point of reference in this new world. Official propaganda, culture, and philosophy were paralyzed. They kept quiet. If we had truly processed the meaning of Chernobyl, much more would have been written about it. The knowledge of our lack of knowledge hinders us. Chernobyl changed our understanding of time—many radioactive particles will live for a hundred, two hundred, a thousand years, thereby altering space. A few days after the
accident, radioactive clouds were detected over Africa. Concepts like “our own” and “foreign” were obliterated. Borders don’t exist for radiation.

In short, people were stunned, and I hurried—to listen, and to write everything down.

I didn’t feel I was writing down the past, I was taking notes on the future. While you’re talking about the catastrophe, you can’t help thinking about the story of the catastrophe. How to go about finding the right language?

We all have many languages—we talk to ourselves in one language, to children in another, to someone we love in a third, and then there’s the language we speak to animals… or to God…. Conversational language isn’t burdened, it isn’t preconceived. It goes its own way and celebrates: with syntax, intonation, accent. Feeling is resurrected accurately. I follow feelings, I am an historian of things that leave no trace.

In Afghanistan a soldier talked about how exciting it was to kill in a group. And how unpleasant it was to execute someone, especially if you’d seen this eyes.

In Chernobyl children came up to me and asked: “Miss, you’re a writer, you must know, will the trees have leaves next year? Will there be little baby fish?”

I heard a young mother crying; her little girl had been born sick and lived less than a year. She only had three fingers on each hand. I put her little body in the coffin and thought: I wish she at least had all her fingers, I mean, she’s a little girl, after all.

Will this remain in history? History would turn its back—but I am astounded.

If I hadn’t read Dostoevsky, I would be in despair over the human soul, its limitlessness.

Afghanistan and Chernobyl buried the empire. We said farewell to the life we had lived, which was called socialism. My cycle of books was coming to an end. In the last book, Secondhand Time, I tried to listen honestly to all the participants in the communist drama. I didn’t have to look for characters, we were all protagonists. The empire fell, but we remained. All of us, the people who came out of socialism, are and are not like other people. We have our concept of good and evil, heroes and martyrs. We have our
own relationship to death. The words “execute,” “liquidate,” “eliminate,” “firing squad,” and “ten years without the right to correspond” (which means being arrested and disappearing) constantly arise in these stories. All are full of hatred and prejudice. We lived in a labor camp. A man may walk out the gates of the camp, but it doesn’t mean he’ll be a free man tomorrow. All he knows is the camp, the value placed on human life also comes from the camps. The writer Varlam Shalamov, who spent almost 20 years in the camps and left us fundamental documents about them, wrote: “The experience of the camp corrupts the executioner and the victim.”

In the ’90s the archives were opened and we were faced with those eternal Russian questions: what is to be done and who is to blame? Stalin? Beria? In my view, good and evil are at the root of our problems. In Second-hand Time one of the characters tells the story of how he was in love with his aunt Olya—she had a beautiful voice, and beautiful hair. Later, when he was in university, perestroika began, and his mother admitted to him that during the Stalinist purges Aunt Olya, her own sister, had written a denunciation of their brother, and that he had rotted away somewhere in the camps of Kolyma. When the storyteller came home for the holidays, he asked his Aunt Olya what she remembered about 1937, when her brother was arrested. “Oh! It was a marvelous time,” Aunt Olya answered, “Everyone loved me, and I was in love.” The young man asked another question: “But what about your brother?” “You couldn’t find an honest person during Stalin’s time. That’s just the way things were,” was her answer. What I want to say is that there is no chemically pure form of evil. Evil is Stalin, and pretty Aunt Olya, too.

The truth was terrifying, and dangerous. Our past frightened us, and the archives were soon closed. Communist monuments are still standing just like they were, plaster Lenins are everywhere, his body lies in the mausoleum—a pyramid of Cheops built in the 20th century. The Communist Party was never put on trial, there was no lustration. The past didn’t let go of us, our heads are crammed with it.

I don’t like to call what I do interviews—it’s conversation about life. I come to people as a friend. We talk about everything: a new blouse, love, and war. The conversation shouldn’t be artificial, there shouldn’t be any barriers. We just talk. About good and evil, about socialism and capitalism, about freedom…. I’ve heard hundreds of answers to my questions. All of
them represent us, as we are at this moment. In answer to the question: what kind of country should this be—a strong country, or an admirable one, where people live a good life?—eight out of 10 respondents choose a strong country. During *perestroika* we were romantics, we thought that freedom would arrive tomorrow. We had that naive certainty. Today we know that the road to freedom is long and hard. Many dangers and temptations await us along that road. We don’t have any experience of freedom; the only experience we have is of labor camps.

Books pile up in the bookstores and markets by the hundreds. Everything has been published: Solzhenitsyn, Shalamov, Evgenia Ginzburg…. At one time, people were imprisoned for having these books, they were dismissed from universities. Nowadays people hurry past them. We are flooded with material goods: you can buy a new coffee grinder, a washing machine, there are dozens of kinds of sausage and cheese in the stores—all available and ready for the trying. The pinnacle of people’s dreams is a used car from Europe, a Schengen visa, and a vacation in Turkey or Egypt. No one stands in line all night for books anymore. We were all sick, unhappy. People want to live, just live, to experience the joy of pretty things, of clothes.

The Red Empire’s collapse was a unique historical occurrence. The sharp turn from socialism to capitalism shook people profoundly, they weren’t prepared for it. This was the first time in history such a turn had taken place. The country was divided: some remember *perestroika* as a great time. I remember how people’s faces changed immediately, even the flow of their movements. The air of freedom was intoxicating. My generation was ecstatic; it wanted to destroy communism, and it was destroyed. Others think that it was a geopolitical catastrophe. I remember how wonderful it was to sit in our kitchens and dream about a free country; but when we were thrown out of that closed circle into the world, into a common reality, we were frightened. We imagined freedom as a holiday, we walked along the streets and plazas chanting “Free-dom! Free-dom!” but had no idea what freedom was. I ask people I talked to: “How did you imagine freedom in the ’90s?” “We thought we would have the same kinds of stores they had in the West. There would be a lot of everything, no shortages.” No one imagined freedom as work. When they understood, everyone was unsettled. Intellectuals as well as the politicians. They didn’t think that freedom
would demand free individuals, which we were not. We didn’t let the world in, we closed ourselves off. Now we scare everyone—Russians are good soldiers, they’ll do anything, life is cheap over here. We only know one way of making others respect us—they must fear us.

Putin came on the scene—and the world is afraid of us.

I am not a politician, nor an economist. I am an artist. I had to organize all this chaos, and feel out the energy lines of the time. And do it through art. I needed to let each person shout out his own truth, in order to understand who we all are. Executioners and victims speak in this book, young and old. Answers are born at the intersection of all these views. And questions, more questions…. How did Putin manage to resurrect the Stalinist machine so quickly? Once again the FSB (formerly the KGB) can burst into any home, confiscate computers, put bloggers on trial for a post supporting Ukraine; supposed spies are being hunted down and put on trial throughout the country—scholars, teachers, military personnel. People are frightened and we don’t know what is really happening in society, or what it really thinks. It’s hard to understand. And there is one question I have never found an answer to: why is it that our suffering doesn’t convert into freedom?

I follow the times, and the human being.
ABOUT SVETLANA ALEXIEVICH

Svetlana Alexievich was born in Ukraine in 1948 and was raised and educated in Belarus. She trained as a journalist but was soon drawn to literature. Influenced by the Belarussian writer Ales Adamovich, Alexievich went on to create her own genre, which she has described as “a chorus of individual voices and a collage of everyday details.” Researching and writing her books, she says, allows her to be “simultaneously a writer, reporter, sociologist, psychologist, and preacher.”

Alexievich’s nonfiction books have been published in more than 50 countries and translated into more than 40 languages. She has also written the scripts for three plays and more than 20 documentary films. She has won many awards for her writing, including the 2015 Nobel Prize in Literature. The Nobel Committee wrote that her “polyphonic writings… [are] a monument to suffering and courage in our time.”
ABOUT THE BARTELS FELLOWSHIP

The Henry E. and Nancy Horton Bartels World Affairs Fellowship was established in 1984 to bring prominent international leaders to Cornell University’s campus in Ithaca, New York. In addition to delivering a major public lecture for the university and local community, Bartels Fellows spend two or three days interacting with faculty and students. The fellowship is awarded and administered by the Mario Einaudi Center for International Studies.

ABOUT THE EINAUDI CENTER

The Mario Einaudi Center for International Studies was established in 1961 to enhance Cornell’s research and teaching about the world’s regions, countries, cultures, and languages. In 1990 it was named for its founding director, the political theorist Mario Einaudi. Today the center houses area studies and thematic programs; organizes speaker series, conferences, and events; provides grants and support to faculty and students; and brings together scholars from many disciplines to address complex international issues.