War Does Not Have a Woman's Face:
The Writings of Svetlana Alexiyevich

by Joan Remple Bishop

Some two years ago a young Russian woman, Svetlana Alexiyevich, published a book in the Soviet Union on the experience of women at war. The Russian edition was given a full-page review article in the Paris daily *Le Monde* and appeared in the English selection of *Le Monde* articles carried in the *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, where the title is translated as "War Does Not Have a Woman's Face." The book is a collection of stories about Russian women's experiences during World War II. As a woman and a peace activist I was intrigued: I wrote to the Soviet Embassy, asking if a translation of this book was available. Although the book itself is not available in English, I did receive extracts from it published in the Soviet English-language magazine, Sputnik. Even in the scattered extracts, the work of Svetlana Alexiyevich provides a moving and thoughtful witness to the reality of war as seen in the lives of women who were there. As Svetlana Alexiyevich notes,

> *for four tormented years I have been walking the scorched kilometres of the pain and memory of others. I have taken down hundreds of stories from women who served at the Front in every imaginable capacity, from medics and cooks to fighter pilots and gunners. And I have recorded the personal testimony of partisans and members of the underground.*

Feminist research in the West has done much to focus attention on women's issues. More importantly, feminists have developed approaches to research which respect women's ways of thinking and speaking. My own involvement with feminist research among battered women has opened by ears to the voices of other women and taught me to listen carefully when women speak. Svetlana Alexiyevich's book displays the same sensitivity to the real lives of women, as does much of the work by Canadian feminists. One can only hope that it will contribute to the growing strength of women's commitment to peace.

The book took four years to write. Svetlana set out with a tape recorder and interviewed hundreds of women who had participated in World War II (or, as it is called in the Soviet Union, the Great Patriotic War). She talked to women who had served as soldiers, women who had been nurses, cooks and laundresses who travelled with the army, and partisans and members of the underground. Svetlana vividly describes the pain which a researcher who becomes involved with her subject experiences:

> *I recorded the stories of dozens of women who were at the Front, and I was overwhelmed. The truth is I just wasn't prepared for what I heard. I was stunned by their tales of suffering, by the horror of events.*

This kind of subjective involvement grounds one in women's experiences and women's pain as nothing else can. She then turned to books and read everything she could find. The kind of testimony she was collecting could only be dealt with by a woman with a gift for empathy:

> *I had to find out everything I could about what had been the most terrible of wars. For only after I'd learned as much as I could was it possible for me to continue to listen to their stories and try to answer the question: what is war if even woman, whose destiny is to give life, not take it away, must also kill.*

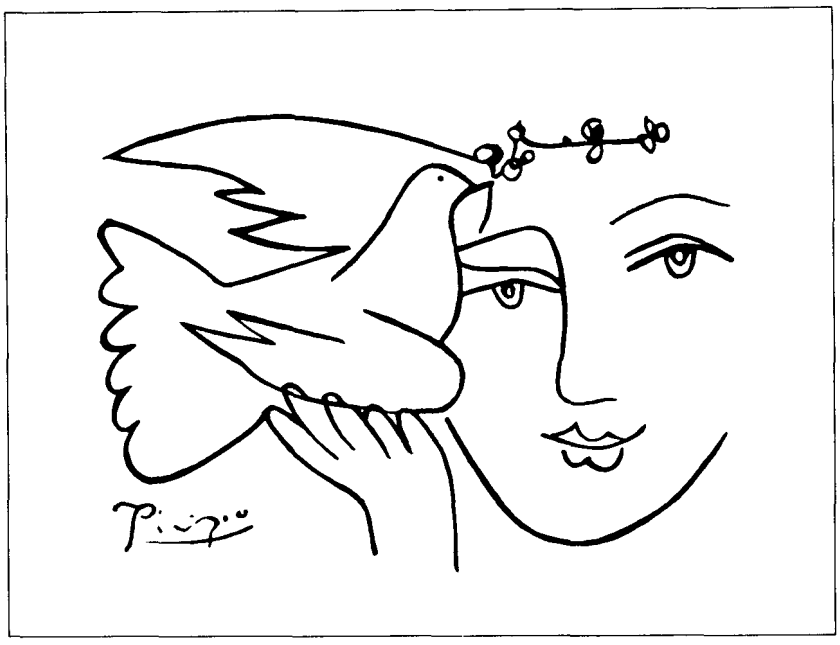
Her reading does not come between herself and the women she talked to. The excerpts are rich in the kind of detail that comes with story-telling, rather than with theorizing. Svetlana says that the first thing she discovered was what gifted storytellers women are:

> *Women remember details, smells, colours. And a woman's memory is more emotional. For example, I spoke with a husband and wife who'd both been in the Navy during the war. He told me how the nazis, when they were retreating, had thrown sailors into the sea, and that the losses had been great. But his wife recalled how those of them who managed to get away from the nazis had all stood and watched the caps of their perished comrades bobbing up and down in the sea. What a detail, how sad and telling! Yet this sort of story was not unique. Other women had their stories too.*

And Svetlana Alexiyevich goes on to chronicle woman after woman's memories of the war.

It is hard for women in North America to imagine what it was like for women in the Soviet Union over forty years ago. We know that twenty million people died there during World War II — one in ten. The defeat of nazi Germany necessitated the mass-mobilization of Soviet citizens. After the invasion no one was exempted due to age or sex:

> *Mother had no sons. There were five daughters in the family, and we were evacuated with mother to Stalingrad. When the city was besieged, all of us volunteered for the front. The whole family — mother and five daughters and father— was fighting at the front then.*



But central to Svetlana's account is her strong belief that women experience war as unnatural. And indeed this perception comes through in the small details of the stories, as well as in the conclusions women draw from their experiences. We meet Senior Sergeant Tamara Illarionovna Davidovich, who was reprimanded for attaching flowers to the bayonet of her rifle; Sergeant Major Nina Yakovlevna Vishnevskaya, who recalled her friend's new white underwear, snow-white and covered with blood. Senior Sergeant Sofia Konstantinovna Dubnyakova described her struggle to change herself from a "damned young lady straight out of Turgenev" who fainted at the sight of her first wounded man. One story, more than any other, captured the mixture of courage and womanliness that runs as a theme through many accounts. Marina Petrovna Smirnova (Kukharskaya), a medical orderly, describes her work:

When I saw my first wounded man, I fainted. Then it passed. When for the first time I crawled under shell-fire to help a wounded soldier, I cried and it seemed to me that my crying was louder than the roar of the battlefield. Then I got accustomed to it ... On December 25, 1942, our 343rd Division of the 56th Army seized a hill on the approaches to Stalingrad. The nazis were determined to retake it at any cost, and a battle began. German tanks started the attack but were stopped by our artillery. The nazis rolled back and there he was, a wounded lieutenant, gunner Kostya Khudov, lying in no-man's land. The medical orderlies who tried to haul him back to our lines were killed. So were two of the sheepdogs of the medical corps ... I felt it was my turn. I removed my cap with ear-flaps, stood upright and started singing, first softly, then louder and louder, our favourite pre-war song ... Both sides, ours and the Germans, stopped firing. I reached Kostya, bent over him, put him on the towsledge and pulled it towards our lines. As I did so, I had one thought in mind: I hope they won't shoot me in the back. Better in the head. But not a single shot was fired before I reached our lines.

Another woman, Vera Safronovna Davydova, a historian, reflected on what it was that led Soviet women to participate in the war. She attributes it to Soviet women's inability to look after her child while her country is being destroyed, as well as to the relative emancipation of Soviet women. Nevertheless, she also says that war was not women's business:

Women could not get used to fighting, no matter how capable of endurance they were, or how well they could adapt themselves to various situations, showing greater flexibility than men. A woman is a mother and nature has seen to it that she is capable of protecting and preserving her child. All the same, women could not get accustomed to war ... Of course, we tried to adapt ourselves, but it was much more difficult for us.

One woman, Antonina Alexeyevna Kondrashova, described the way the nazis drove women ahead of them to find the land mines laid by partisans. As a partisan, she experienced tremendous angst on learning that her mother had been used this way and had been shot by partisans in ambush. She says:

You can't imagine how unbearable it is to live with all that. The longer I live the more unbearable it becomes. When, at night, I sometimes hear young people laugh or somebody's voice under my window I believe for a moment that it is a child crying.

Women in North America have much to learn from the experience of women who lived in the midst of war. North Americans have not been spared the horrors of war, but for most North American women war is something that happened in another time, in other places, and to other people. As a young woman, the same might be said of Svetlana Alexiyevich. But she listened, and became a part of what she heard. And she leaves a challenge with all of us, a challenge that speaks eloquently to our own experience as women:

We've all got used to men talking about war. We've become inured, and this has given rise to a dangerous belief: war is not unnatural. And in the West there is even a theory that men need war. The world has been turned upside down, but women are setting it on its feet again. For women war is a modern form of cannibalism, and they repudiate it with all their being. Women and war are diametrically opposed. And if women reject war, then it's possible that war itself will die.

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