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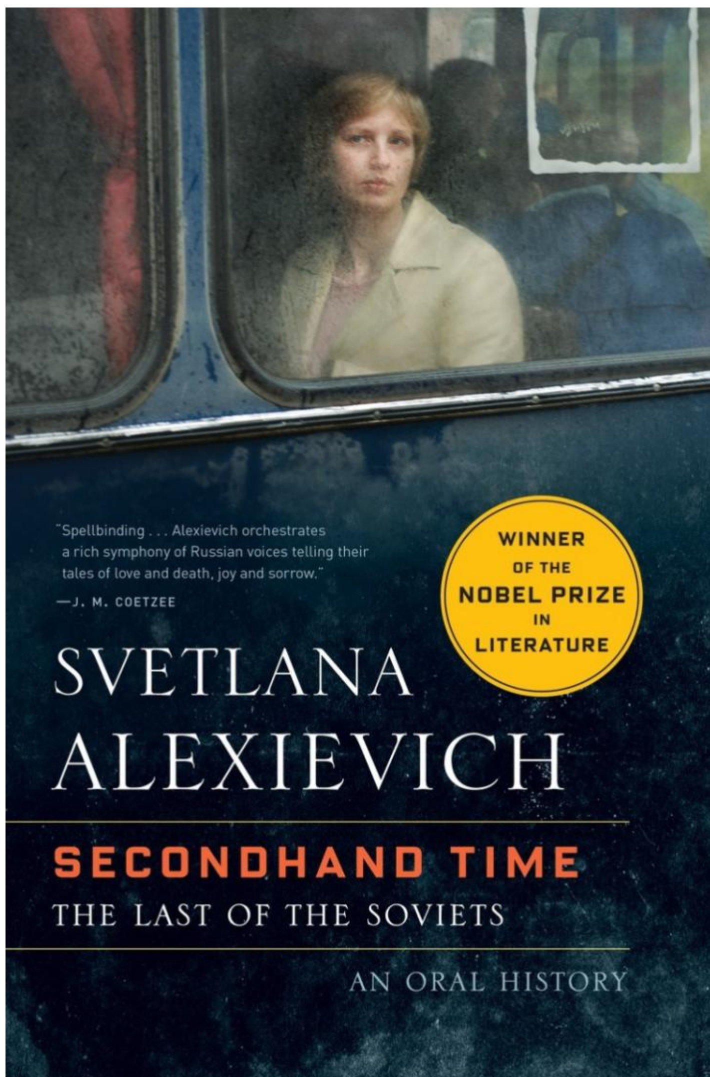
Book Review: "Secondhand Time The Last of the Soviets"
by Svetlana Alexievich, Random House, $30, 470 pp.

# Recalling the confusion and regret over the Soviet collapse



by David E. Hoffman

There’s a Russian word, “raspad,” that means disintegration, breakup or collapse. Raspad is what happened to the Soviet Union in every sense of the word. An enormous party-state and the ideology and history behind it simply crashed like a tired old building, leaving heaps of broken windows and girders, piles of dust and bricks. The crash was followed by a pell-mell attempt to build a new Russia on an entirely different set of beliefs but populated by the same tired souls. The whole thing was so utterly sudden and remarkable that it has correctly been a major topic for historians and journalists, who have often approached the history with forensic tools, excavating the broken shards of the old system and testing the new.

But what of the living people who made up Soviet communism and found themselves, literally the next morning, citizens of the new Russian capitalism, who lived in an exhausted police state and woke up in a nascent democracy, who gave their blood and treasure to defend the Soviet Union in World War II and now found the country tossed in the ashbin of history? Not to mention, what of the younger people who dreamed of a capitalist paradise that did not materialize; those who made the pivot, leaped with energy and joy into the new era — only to see it disappoint? How does a whole society cope with a raspad of such enormous scope? It’s one thing to see flags be taken down and raised, to grasp that an ideology has died and a new one been declared. But far more important — and far more difficult to fathom — is what happens in the minds of people living through an age of upheaval.

This unknown lies at the heart of Svetlana Alexievich’s “Secondhand Time,” published in Russian in 2013 and now appearing in an English translation by Bela Sheyevich. It is one of the most vivid and incandescent accounts of this society caught in the throes of change that anyone has yet attempted, the story of what one character aptly describes as “our lost generation — a communist upbringing and capitalist life.”

Alexievich stations herself at a crossroads of history and turns on her tape recorder. The result is oral history that at times can feel more authentic than narrated history. She lets her characters do all the talking, a method that earned her the 2015 Nobel Prize in Literature. No one should pick up this book expecting to find a well-explained chronological history of what happened in the Kremlin. Rather, the material is a trove of emotions and memories, raw and powerful. As history, it is the exact opposite, say, of a Soviet leader standing on Lenin’s Tomb, distant and unfathomable. Alexievich makes it feel intimate, as if you are sitting in the kitchen with the characters, sharing in their happiness and agony, enveloped in their nostalgia and riven with their anxiety.

Relying on human memory and emotions can be risky; minds can be faulty. Not every testimony in “Secondhand Time” is made of fact; a fair number may have been warped by excitements and passions, and the passing of time. But it doesn’t matter — the collective power of the stories, impressionistic and very human, drives the book’s persuasive authenticity.

Tanya Kuleshova, a 21-year-old student, tells Alexievich how, on Dec. 19, 2010, she happily ventured out to October Square, the main square in Minsk, to protest a fraudulent election. “We went for fun, it wasn’t serious,” she says. “We’re the first generation that’s never been scared. Never been flogged. Never been shot at. So what if they put us in jail for fifteen days? That’s nothing! Something to write about in your blog.” Soon she was arrested and beaten by the anti-riot police. “Face down in the snow, bitch!” a policeman shouts at her. “One move and I’ll kill you.” But later, another cop comes up to her quietly and of his own initiative sneaks her a Snickers bar. “Take it,” he implores. “What the hell were you thinking going out on the square?”

Kuleshova spent a month in a nasty jail, one of dozens of characters in Alexievich’s study who find themselves pinched by the hinge of history, snared between past and present. Another is Elena Yurievna, third secretary of a district party committee, who recalled the days after the 1991 failed coup attempt when hundreds of people turned in their Communist Party membership cards, with explanations. One party member wrote, “The times have led me into confusion.” Nothing more profound could be said about a whole generation of people who were variously exhilarated, disoriented, humiliated and liberated in the rush to a free-market democracy of the 1990s. Yurievna recalled, speaking of the democratic reformers in Boris Yeltsin’s time: “It wasn’t freedom they were after, it was blue jeans, supermarkets. . . . They were fooled by the shiny wrappers. . . . Now our stores are filled with all sorts of stuff. An abundance. But heaps of salami have nothing to do with happiness. Or glory. We used to be a great nation! Now we’re nothing but peddlers and looters.”

Not all were so disappointed. One young man looking back on the 1990s recalled how “boys and girls stumbled around with crazed expressions” as capitalism arrived. “Wild, inexplicable avarice took hold of everyone,” he said. “The smell of money filled the air. Big money, and absolute freedom — no Party, no government. Everyone wanted to make some dough. . . . Some sold, others bought. . . . Some ‘covered,’ others ‘protected.’ ” On scoring his first fortune, the young man took his friends out to a restaurant and ordered the best vodka money could buy. “I wanted to feel the weight of the glass in my hand, imagine that I was one of the beautiful people.”

So did many others, but they woke up to a harsher reality. Today’s Russia hardly lives up to the hopes for democracy and capitalism that were so vivid and promising after the raspad. Alexievich’s unsparing documentary work shows that such a colossal shock reverberates for decades, often in unexpected ways, and the jarring emotions that were let loose still resonate in Russia, often crudely exploited by President Vladimir Putin to justify his authoritarian rule. This may be one of the single most important lessons of the entire Soviet denouement: that a society is a slow-moving vessel, not easily turned around, anchored deep in memory, experience and a shared culture. It is not about changing flags but about changing minds. And that was, and remains, the work of generations.

*David E. Hoffman is a contributing editor to The Washington Post and the author of “The Billion Dollar Spy: A True Story of Cold War Espionage and Betrayal*

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