making war on bodies
militarisation, aesthetics and embodiment in international politics

Edited by Catherine Baker
Aesthetics, embodiment and militarisation are perhaps never more closely joined than in the aesthetics of the military body disabled by war. The fundamental rationale of war, and the ultimate purpose of the institutions which fight it, is an interdisciplinary literature reminds us, the destruction of bodies.\(^1\) Participants in war, and those who love them, do not just fear their death: they fear what condition war might leave their living bodies in. The mechanised and explosive means of destroying the body in modern warfare make war a matter of horrific injury even beyond what one armed body can inflict on another, or – to use the more sensory language that has come more naturally to cultural historians than disciplinary international relations\(^2\) – a matter of mangling, roasting, poisoning, lacerating, dismembering and tearing limb from limb.\(^3\) Indeed, Jasbir Puar now argues that both war and industrial capitalism require certain bodies to be marked out as ‘preordained for . . . often targeted maiming’, echoing Joanna Bourke’s observation that the male body ‘was intended to be mutilated’ during the Great War.\(^4\)

The disabled, maimed and disfigured body, moreover, looms large over the affective politics and psychodynamics of the body through which processes of militarisation work.\(^5\) Against militarised representations of the health, strength, vigour and glamour military training and service bestows on bodies, experiences and representations of disabled veterans become embodied evidence of the other transformations war inflicts.\(^6\) Anti-war art traditions in painting and photography, indeed, rely on images of horrifically wounded soldiers as much as civilian victims of war.\(^7\) And yet disabled veterans’ bodies can themselves be
re-militarised, from the sacrificial spectacle that the French *gueules cassées* (World War I veterans with disfigured faces) represented in victory parades, to the figure of the maimed US male veteran of Iraq/Afghanistan re-masculinised and re-eroticised through the twin technologies of ‘sexually allusive’ photography and ‘techno-militarized’ prosthetic limbs. Physical disability and disfigurement are perhaps where the conjunction between militarisation, aesthetics and embodiment seems to become most uncomfortable: ‘we’ (the community of readers interested in all three things) are contemplating the aesthetics and embodiment, sometimes even the troubling yet seductive aestheticisation, of an activity which ultimately exists to tear bodies apart.

By investigating aesthetic practices of representing disability and disfigurement in Svetlana Alexievich’s collection of interviews with women Red Army veterans, *The Unwomanly Face of War* (analysed here in its most recent English translation), this chapter argues the links between militarisation, aesthetics and embodiment must be anchored in the intersubjective aesthetics of disability. Asking what structures of feeling are projected on to disabled military bodies, and other bodies disabled in war, at any historical and political moment helps to establish what the aesthetics of both war and disability in those places and times have been: that is, how onlookers have been meant to feel on encountering the reality, imagination or thought of war-disabled bodies. The very question of how visible war-disabled bodies should be, on what terms, is both a psychically painful matter for those inhabiting them, such as thousands of facially disfigured World War I veterans who had to choose whether to hide their faces behind painted tin masks, and a matter of wider cultural representation.

The answer is inflected by what impairments they have sustained, and socio-cultural perceptions of those; by each body’s gendered, racialised, ethnicised and class-based signifiers of social identity; by which side they fought for, and what wartime violence (if any) they carried out. In the contemporary West, for instance, the re-empowered veteran amputee is almost hypervisible, while just as dead victims of coalition attacks and drone strikes are made ungrievable, living but disabled civilian victims are concealed until activists inject their images into the public sphere.

Critical military studies (CMS) scholars including Zoe Wool, Ken MacLeish and Alison Howell have already studied troops’ and veterans’ embodied experiences, and others are exploring figures of disabled veterans within wider socio-cultural militarisation. Yet CMS aesthetic and cultural enquiry can integrate disability even further by drawing on disability studies’ cultural and literary turn. Disability scholars like...
Lennard Davis, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder view disability as the product of a social context structured by the construction and enforcement of bodily ‘normalcy’, turning material bodily impairment into socially constructed ‘disability’. War, creating large numbers of disabled veterans in social categories where disability pre-war was relatively rare, often creates crises in public imaginations of the body, potentially altering the gendered bodily politics of militarisation and resistance to it. Since most veterans of mass warfare have been men, studies of disabled veterans typically concentrate on post-war masculinities: yet states which have mobilised women for war also have to contend with the reality and figure of disabled female veterans – above all, perhaps, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), which in 1941–5 put more than 800,000 women on the front line. These women, and the public silence about their service, are the collective subject of Alexievich’s *The Unwomanly Face of War*.

This chapter concerns Alexievich’s book of ‘documentary prose’, based on interviews with Red Army women that she collected in 1978–83 and could first publish in 1985 – or, more accurately, the 2017 English translation of Alexievich’s fourth Russian text. This more complex description foregrounds its complicated history of publication, revision and retranslation, the literary techniques through which Alexievich remediates the women’s words, and the fact that I as a scholar am responding to a translation which has become an artefact of comparative literature, not to the original Russian. Alexievich’s winning the 2015 Nobel Prize in Literature led both to new Russian editions of her work and to the retranslation and reissue of her books in English. Hailed by reviewers as an ‘extraordinary’ account of Soviet women soldiers’ experiences of total war, the book is framed as a counter-narrative to official Soviet discourse of a glorious Great Patriotic War embodied by the heroism of men. Alexievich both asserts that ‘the true experience of that conflict could be better grasped through the recollections of women combatants’, which she selects and arranges to emphasise intimate and emotional detail, and uses those recollections to contest the idea of war as glorious, a myth in which the militarised Soviet system incorporated everybody.

Alexievich’s very title, indeed, already conveys a gendered moral aesthetics of war and embodiment. Its surface level plays on the famous gendered contrast between the male ‘Just Warrior’ and female ‘Beautiful Soul’, upsetting that binary because the reader knows it concerns women soldiers. Though both the Russian and English titles contrast war to a womanly or woman’s face, the Russian makes them separate domains
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(У войны не женское лицо literally translates as In War There Is No Womanly Face) while the English collides them, inviting readers more directly to picture how war’s unwomanly face might appear. Both in the title and throughout the text, this chapter argues, Alexievich organises her intervention against Stalinist and late Soviet layers of militarisation around the trope of disabling/disfiguring war injury preventing women from fully being women after the war. This trope amplifies what her interviewees (as remediated by her editorial work and their own remembering) relate as their own fears during and after wartime, when it was commonsensically believed that disabled women would not be able to become wives and mothers as the Stalinist gender order expected – roles already less accessible to former Red Army women just because they had served at the front. Aesthetics and embodiment in this example of resistance to militarisation thus combine in two ways: firstly, the aesthetics of how (gendered) bodies would have looked, and how women feared their bodies would be made to look after disabling or disfiguring injury; secondly, the aesthetics of how Alexievich writes about bodies to activate readers’ own embodied sense-memories or sense-imaginations. On both these levels, disability studies explains what is affectively at stake in aesthetic practices using the figure of the disabled veteran body.

Disability Studies and the Disabled Veteran Body

Disability studies, like other theoretical–activist approaches, collectively theorises the embodied knowledge many of its authors have acquired from lived experience and applies it for critical ends. Against the so-called medical model of disability, treating impairments as individual defects to be cured, disability studies links ‘the social meanings, symbols, and stigmas attached to disability identity . . . to enforced systems of exclusion and oppression’, considering disability as socially produced. Its own ways of knowing nevertheless always return to the materiality and lived experience of impairment, to bodily reality and physical as well as psychic pain.

Embodiment and aesthetics, which this volume connects, are always already intertwined in disability studies. The literary scholar Lennard Davis has argued that ‘disability is a cultural phenomenon rooted in the senses’, since disability becomes meaningful when an observer perceives people to be disabled based on their deviation from bodily norms – of form, size, comportment, movement, symmetry and regularity itself. So deep-rooted are ideas of what Garland-Thomson calls the ‘normate’ body that, theorists like Tobin Siebers suggest, they even

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inform how embodied identities based on race, gender, sexuality and class are marginalised and stigmatised. Disability studies’ cultural turn has questioned how literary and visual texts’ representations of disabled characters and people ‘enforce’ (in Davis’s words) the normalcy of the abled body. David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, for instance, use the term ‘narrative prosthesis’ to explain how creators use disability in characterisation as ‘a metaphorical signifier of social and individual collapse’, showing (with an intentional play on words) that ‘disability has been used throughout history as a crutch upon which literary narratives lean for their representational power, disruptive potentiality, and analytical insight’. Disability studies thus offers reading practices which make sense of disability in literary and (audio)visual representations. But this cultural turn does not divert attention from disabled people’s embodied experience and subjectivity – for it is the perceptions of disability and normalcy that nondisabled people have largely acquired from these representations which shape their reactions on seeing and encountering disabled bodies. Such perceptions thus shape the intersubjective psychological and affective dimensions of how disabled people experience their own embodiment, which Carol Thomas terms disability’s ‘psycho-emotional dimensions’.

The psycho-emotional dimensions of disability do not just include the psychological effects of structural disablism which imposes physical and socio-economic barriers to what bodies and people can do, but also the barriers which create restrictions within individual selves, stemming from how others’ reactions to their bodies have made them feel. These often embarrassing or humiliating everyday encounters can be theorised as an ‘ontological invalidation . . . experienced at the point that the stranger reacts to the disabled person’. This is especially the case for amputation and disfigurement, most severe among war’s physical wounds. Moreover, not just the stranger’s gaze but (perhaps even more so) the loved one’s gaze can inflict such psycho-emotional harm. The reintegration of the family unit around disabled veterans is thus a common subject of governmental and cultural anxiety when troops return, as social and cultural historians of war have shown.

Disabled veterans’ and bodies’ complex relationships to wartime and post-war militarisation have been studied most extensively for World War I. The numbers of men who came home from war with such impairments, and the class differences between middle-class officers and the working-class men who in peacetime incurred them more frequently, left disabled veterans, their families and wider society renegotiating the aesthetics of post-war masculinities. Drawing on disability studies
scholars including Garland-Thomson and the historian Henri-Jacques Stiker, Ana Carden-Coyne argues that ‘[t]he mutilated body [of disabled veterans] offered visual evidence of the tragedy of war, searing it into cultural memory’ and provoking an ‘aesthetics of normalizing embodiment’ in post-war Britain. The hegemonic ‘ideology of ability’ beneath the period’s gendered and racialised constructions of masculinity is evident when Carden-Coyne describes the ‘common reactions’ of aversion or pity to disabled veterans, who ‘literally embodied the [public’s] fears of disabled people’. Women, as constructed in literature, meanwhile ‘often appear[ed] as the archetypal witnesses to the pain of war’, as battlefield nurses or at home.

Particularly terrifying, for soldiers and loved ones contemplating what they might suffer, as well as veterans, intimates and strangers witnessing what mechanised war did to flesh and bone, was facial disfigurement. Suzannah Biernoff argues that wartime and post-war British visual culture exhibited a ‘visual anxiety and aversion’ to veterans’ facial disfigurement, contrasting with more common and happier depictions of veteran amputees. Print, however, could depict their disfigurements in much more detail. Explaining why (as Biernoff argues) ‘[i]t was showing (and looking at) the disfigured face that was taboo’ is an aesthetic question: while reading text required picturing the injury in one’s own mind, photography directly activated sight, confronting onlookers with a face which ideologies of bodily normalcy would not instantly resolve as such. While maxillofacial surgeons and prosthetic artists tried to find ways to ‘humanise’ the mutilated face, disfigured veterans lived with knowing their appearance had become frightful ‘where there was once a handsome and welcome face’ (as the Manchester Evening Chronicle wrote near the end of the war, calling the facially disfigured soldier’s loss of identity ‘The Worst Loss of All’). Contrasts in other combatant countries revealed that all militarised embodied aesthetics are nationally inflected. France’s gueules cassées, for instance, received more collective public recognition than in Britain, while US media imposed ‘visual quarantine’ on disfigured veterans’ images (besides a few exemplary recoveries) but turned the plastic surgeon into a hero of ‘miraculous physical transformation’ instead.

The disfigured military body again became a cultural anxiety in countries heavily committed to the War on Terror, since advances in military medicine have increased the numbers of troops surviving extreme battlefield burns. Photojournalistic portraiture and documentary film dealt most with the aesthetics of disfigurement during these wars. Nina Berman’s award-winning 2006 photo-series ‘Marine Wedding’, taken
for People magazine, depicted one such burns survivor, Marine Sgt Ty Ziegel, going about his everyday hometown life and marrying his fiancée. In Berman’s wedding photograph, which People did not print, Ziegel stands in uniform with his earless, noseless head bowed.44 His bride’s expression, staring at the camera, seems to embody the uncertainty that (dominant aesthetics of disability make onlookers believe) it would be ‘natural’ to feel about resuming domestic and intimate roles towards someone whose appearance one has been culturally conditioned to find monstrous. Samantha Wehbi argues that Berman achieves a ‘counter-hegemonic message’ about US militarism by visualising how US wars have left young veterans’ bodies – but that that message relies on a hegemonic message about disability itself, that is, that the disfigured face should be the ‘exotic’ object of the observer’s stare.45 A similar dynamic in Alexievich’s evocation of disability and bodily destruction emerges once we consider Soviet constructions of disability and the history of disabled Soviet veterans.

Disabled Soviet Veterans after the ‘Great Patriotic War’

No country involved in World War II had more returning disabled veterans than the USSR, or scarcer material resources to meet their needs.46 The immediate Stalinist mythologisation of the war through the heroic conventions of ‘socialist realism’ resulted in ‘silencing or denying’ evidence of how much devastation war had caused, and disabled veterans or ‘war invalids’ were absent from official depictions of wartime or post-war life.47 Soviet ideology constructed disability, or invalidity, in terms of (un)fitness for productive labour. The official figure of 2,576,000 disabled troops discharged before May 1945 (7.46 per cent of the Red Army’s 1945 strength) itself concealed an unknown number of others who were not recorded because they could still resume their former jobs; the ‘reconstruction’ of war-disabled Soviet bodies, personally and socially, primarily concerned re-fitting them for work.48 The problem Alexievich was contesting in Soviet public memory, however, also affects scholarly literature on Soviet veterans: the Great Patriotic War’s disabled veterans have overwhelmingly been thought of as just men, although 800,000 women served on the front line.49

The estimated tens of thousands of disabled female veterans, doubly invisible in official Soviet discourse, are scarcely more visible in the social and cultural history, or even gender history, of late Stalinism. Historians have asked how disabled veterans negotiated the Soviet gender order, and how far (if at all) imaginations of the body were renegotiated after
war’s end; an almost exclusive emphasis on disability’s intersection with masculinities, however, has compounded the erasure of disabled female veterans in Soviet society itself.50 This erasure was widespread. Frances Bernstein, for instance, notes that the numbers of disabled, especially limbless, men needing reincorporation into Soviet society threatened a ‘feminization’ of the collective Soviet self, which had to be ‘remasculinized’ by reverting to pre-war gender norms: ‘disability was perceived as a problem of men’, and so was its solution.51 This solution was engineered not just by erasing disabled men from monuments and victory parades (Red Army women suffered similar erasure) and massaging official disability statistics, but also through lauding new Soviet-made prosthetics, which (exemplifying the propaganda–practice gap) were only actually available to a few fortunate or well-connected amputees.52

In contrast to the contemporaneous rehabilitation of disabled veterans in the USA, which sought to restore disabled men as heads of families (involving wives/fiancées in the emotional labour of re-normalising disabled and disfigured male bodies53), Soviet ideology expected men to be reintegrated into ‘the collective family’ but not necessarily the domestic one.54 Their ‘mastery over feminized machines’ mattered more than their recovery as potential husbands and fathers, despite the post-war demographic shortage of men, and despite the state’s ambitions to increase the birth rate and preserve gender norms.55 Veterans who publicly narrated their lives under Soviet rule internalised this ideology of rehabilitation through labour.56 Bernstein only refers once to disabled women veterans, pictured doing ‘strictly feminine pursuits such as sewing and knitting’ in the few photographs of women wearing the famous ‘Kononov arm’.57 Disabling injury and rehabilitation, it would seem, were themselves part of the ‘unwomanly’ face of war.

Socialist realist aesthetics, too, adapted to the sheer number of returning disabled men, while writing out disabled women veterans. ‘The new hero of Socialist Realist literature’ in 1944–6, writes Anna Krylova, ‘was physically and psychologically mutilated’, representing men brought to emotional crisis by ‘the seeming impossibility’ of picturing themselves living ‘normal family life’.58 Offsetting these traumatised men were ‘physically whole and psychologically integrated women’, necessitating a ‘silence about female trauma’ to preserve the gendered binary between masculine war trauma and feminine nurture.59 This version of the New Soviet Woman was not just ‘Beautiful Soul’ but also feminine ‘soul-healer’, requiring hard boundaries between the normative home and front.60 The size of the ideological hole female veterans fell down is evident when Krylova notes that these novels’ female characters who
heal men had not been to the front, and that the few female characters who had been to the front are shown as unable to heal men. Representing traumatised, disfigured and disabled female veterans when war disability was constructed as a masculine problem would have further upset late Stalinism’s gender order.

A more realist war literature (including the oral historian Ales Adamovich, who inspired Alexievich), and war art, did however emerge after the Thaw. One such artist was Gennadii Dobrov, whose drawings of disabled veterans in Soviet residential homes were completed in 1974–80 but only started being exhibited and published under glasnost. One, ‘The Family’, showed a male defender of Moscow and quadruple amputee in his wheelchair using a telephone with his wife behind him: the onlooker is told, but not shown, that she too lost her legs during the war. Other drawings in Dobrov’s ‘War Autographs’ series, rendered in heavily shaded dense black strokes, included a female Belarusian partisan who had lost both legs after being trapped in frozen marshland, and an unnamed woman ‘with a burnt face’ who had never been on the front line, but who had fainted into flames after hearing her husband had been killed in battle: Dobrov pictured her with a veil of sacking over her face, holding a cane and a bespectacled mask. Unlike the facially disfigured men Dobrov shows face-on, the absence of any fleshly face – even a burned one – is here what forces the viewer’s stare.

It was thus within a discursive space where official memory had concealed both disabled veterans and women veterans, and where everyday memory had largely turned against women veterans too, that Alexievich began interviewing female veterans in 1978. Alexievich sought to recover women veterans’ voices, but not necessarily to establish disabled female veterans as historical subjects. Her representations of women’s own disablement were far outnumbered by narratives of women’s and families’ fears they would be disabled or disfigured, fuelled by social anxieties about what man would marry a disabled female veteran and how disabled women would fulfil their prescribed roles in Soviet society, or even meet their basic needs.

Disability and the Female Veteran in The Unwomanly Face of War

Svetlana Alexievich’s ‘documentary narrative’ about women veterans, first published in Russian in 1985, was first translated into English in 1988 by the USSR’s official English-language publisher Progress, was revised for three more Russian editions, then came to wider transnational attention
after Alexievich won the Nobel Prize. The narrative, in Alexievich’s characteristic style, comprises a composite of extracts from interviews she started collecting a year before the Soviet–Afghan War began. Her introduction, as presented in the 2017 English edition, frames the book as an act of recovery she was compelled to perform after growing up in a post-war Belarusian village, where women’s voices carried the community’s memory of war and occupation. Alexievich’s search for women veterans’ voices stems, she writes, from the gulf between a public culture where ‘half of the books [in every library] were about the war’, women veterans’ public forgetting and shaming, and her remembered everyday life where ‘stories of the war are told by women. They weep.’66 Indeed, she introduces the book as an intervention into gendered ways of knowing about war itself:

There have been a thousand wars – small and big, known and unknown. And still more has been written about them. But . . . it was men writing about men – that much was clear at once. Everything we know about war we know with ‘a man’s voice’. We are all captives of ‘men’s’ notions and ‘men’s’ sense of war.67

Besides what evidence it might give about women veterans’ experiences, critics have importantly also viewed it as a historically situated text, written during the Soviet–Afghan War and challenging official memory of the Great Patriotic War in ways that (like Dobrov’s paintings) could only be publicised more widely when glasnost began.68 The women’s testimonies, Krylova writes, convey this very tension between ‘[t]he pain of discursive erasure’ and women’s fears of admitting their veteran status amid ‘the popular dissociation of family life and female front experience’ in post-war Soviet society.69 This dissociation extended to the shame attached to being a female veteran when gossip presumed front-line women would have been sexually promiscuous with men.70 Alexievich’s use of oral testimony sought to break the mould of official Soviet war discourse and the ‘monolithic “Soviet” woman’ at once,71 while making the recuperative assumption (shared by much feminist oral history practice in the 1980s) that women interviewing women were especially equipped to uncover their subjects’ emotional truths.72 Aliaksandr Novikau, indeed, calls Unwomanly Face a paradigmatic illustration of Christine Sylvester’s arguments about the centrality of emotional experiences in studying war.73

Women’s perception, in Alexievich’s epistemology, is clearly expected to offer ‘a more “truthful” depiction of the war’ than stories told by men.74 Some responses to her work do, indeed, read her writing as direct
journalistic access to her subjects’ real words and feelings. Specialists in (post-)Soviet literature emphasise, however, that Alexievich’s books should be read as literary confections more than history (to the extent these are separate): Alexievich’s technique of assembling extracts into ‘choruses’ or ‘variations on themes’ stitches them into a claim to represent a universal ‘emotional history’ of war, and the scale of her editorial intervention is even clearer in her later book about young male veterans of the Afghan War (Boys in Zinc). Authorial revisions between that book’s 1991 and 2013 Russian editions made the text noticeably less ‘polyphonic’ and more ‘monochromatic’, more like a single documentary truth claim. Holly Myers describes Alexievich’s aesthetic technique of threading repeated words and phrases through different monologues as an ‘artistic manipulation’. Unwomanly Face thus presents a (severaltimes-revised) story Alexievich wishes to tell about women veterans, not the stories women veterans told her.

Although the metaphor of the face sits in the very title to connote war’s corporeal and emotional toll on women, the material body in general, and disability/disfigurement in particular, have been less important in most responses to Unwomanly Face than the aesthetics of trauma. While Novikau observes that ‘pain and suffering are the central topics of all Alexievich’s books’, this pain is psychic, not physical. One extract highlighted by Daniel Bush, for instance, concerns a sniper who found a wounded female comrade with her legs ‘so mangled that we were barely able to bandage her’: the platoon saved her, although she had begged to be shot because ‘Who will have any use for me in this condition?’, and they found her in an invalids’ home thirty years later when she had not even told her mother she was alive. Alexievich comments in the 1990 edition that ‘I physically feel the materiality of the pain living in this tiny woman in her old plaid wrap.’ This is the pain of the teller, not the sufferer, as in representations of disabled characters it can often be. Yet there is more to perceive about Alexievich’s aesthetics of embodiment by applying Lennard Davis’s observation that ‘a disabilities studies consciousness’ can alter readings not just of novels with disabled protagonists but any writerly text.

The theme of disabling war injury and its bodily effects resonates through Unwomanly Face in two ways: depictions of witnessing the mutilated or burned bodies of others (sensory experiences which ‘should’ have been unbearable but women at the front still had to endure), and fears of suffering disability or disfigurement oneself. Both invoke an aesthetics of embodiment that does not concern disabled soldiers’ and veterans’ psycho-emotional experiences so much as onlookers’, who
typically encounter ‘non-normate’ bodies through a gaze conditioned to associate visible disability and disfigurement with fear and unease. Narrators’ encounters with bodies robbed of their independence by amputation or rendered unrecognisable by severe burns become turning points for women’s initiation into front-line war experience: the medical assistant who rallied against her fainting instinct on seeing her first wounded man, his thigh ‘turned inside out’ in a compound fracture; the nurse who did not tell her mother about assisting at ‘unbearable’ amputations, bloodied and carrying away heavy male legs ‘like a baby’, but instead reassured her she had warm boots and clothes; an infantry medic in her first battle at Sevsk, forced to bite off one man’s arm by its remaining sinews so that she could bandage the rest of him at all. All these accounts are, of course, Alexievich’s edited narrative, not direct records of the women’s words.

Fear of returning from the war ‘crippled’ or disfigured, likewise mediated through Alexievich’s editing, also echoes through *Unwomanly Face*. The opening chapter, framed as testimonies by two snipers (including the story about the comrade who lost both legs saving a commander), also contains one woman remembering her mother’s words after she came home ‘gray-haired’ and partially deaf aged twenty-one:

> I asked one thing of God, that if they disfigure you, better let them kill you. I went to the train station all the time . . . Once I saw a girl soldier there with a burned face . . . I shuddered – you! Afterward I prayed for her, too.\textsuperscript{85}

An earlier passage in the account of Olga Yakovlevna Omelchenko, the medical assistant who fought at Sevsk, relates her company’s chief of staff warning her away from the front: ‘Let me at least transfer you to a medical unit. It’s all very well if they kill you, but what if you’re left without eyes, without arms? Have you thought of that?’\textsuperscript{86}

The dread of being left alive but incapable, and socially unmarriageable, reverberated differently among troops depending on whether they were imagining their futures against scripts prescribed for Soviet fathers/husbands or Soviet mothers/wives. Intertwined ideologies of ability and sexuality meant that amputation and disfigurement were very widely assumed to be the end of individuals’ intimate and sexual lives, therefore, heteronormatively, their social personhood.\textsuperscript{87} Men, expected to fulfil themselves and feed their families through labour, feared destitution as an itinerant market vendor or being left to their mothers’ care\textsuperscript{88} – another medical assistant’s testimony describes avoiding the market for years after the war because, among the men wheeling themselves around
‘on homemade platforms’, she imagined encountering a wounded lieutenant she had saved who had ordered her to shoot him instead.89 The many women who, before departing for the front, had hoped to mature into motherhood also had to confront what it would mean, amid Stalinism’s housing and food shortages, to be a permanently unmarried woman dependent on relatives. The loss of women veterans’ pre-war future, Alexievich often implies, was at the heart of their tragedy: disability, in her composite narrative, sharpens the remediated contemporaneous fear that front-line service itself would make women unmarriageable, their reputations damaged by years spent among men.

Unwomanly Face’s direct testimonies of disabled subjects, particularly visibly disabled subjects, are meanwhile scarcer. One tank battalion medical assistant was temporarily invalided to a Ukrainian village ‘with [her] legs crippled’ (the sympathy of the woman who hosted her, initially mistaking her for a boy due to her haircut and uniform, left her feeling ‘so sorry for myself, and for mama. What am I doing here among men? I’m a girl. What if I come home with no legs?’), but recovered, the only girl from her village who survived.90 An anti-aircraft artillery sergeant’s testimony describes almost losing her feet to frostbite after a shrapnel wound trapped her in the snow: after six months in hospital, when the doctors wanted to amputate her leg above the knee, she planned to strangle herself with a towel, but an older nurse stopped her and the ward doctor lobbied for an experimental treatment that saved her from amputation the next day.91

The only extended testimony by a physically disabled female veteran belongs to Thecla Feodorovna Struy, an ex-partisan whose narrative begins by stating she had always believed Stalin and the Communists, and who had already been a Supreme Soviet deputy. Struy had suffered leg wounds in her last battle and frostbite when her German captors left the wounded in the snow. When the wounded prisoners from her unit escaped, her Party status entitled her to a rescue flight, which could not land until after her legs had been amputated in the field. Surgeons in the rear (one of whom had also lost his legs) performed four more re-amputations to excise a gangrene infection, and although ‘[a]t first [she] wept . . . [she] sobbed . . . [she] imagined how [she]’d go crawling on the ground’, they praised her for being more stoic than any male patients and having ‘never made a sound’.92 Struy returned home after the war and became vice-chair of the district Party committee, in charge of visiting collective farms (‘kolkhozes’). Struy’s narrative distinguishes between the impairments of age and war-related disability when she emphasises:
now I walk poorly, because I’m old, but back then I ran around town and walked everywhere on foot. I ran around on my wooden legs; I travelled to the kolkhozes. . . . How happy I was then, though it was very, very hard for me to go from village to village. They would send me fifteen or twenty miles away, and sometimes I rode, sometimes I walked. I’d go somewhere through the forest, fall down, and be unable to get up. I’d steady myself against my bag, or cling to a tree, get up, and go on. And I received a pension, I could have lived for myself, for myself alone. But I wanted to live for others. I’m a Communist . . .

Struy’s narrative has itself been revised, between 1985 and 2004, when another Russian edition appeared. In 1985, when reinscribing herself as a faithful Communist would actually have been closer to hegemonic public narratives about the war, the last sentences of the quoted passage instead ended ‘I could have lived for myself. But I couldn’t have stayed at home, I wanted to be useful. I wanted to be like everybody. I live here with my sister. They’ve built a house for us’. The interview ended with Alexievich remarking on Struy’s high ceilings and Struy saying they just seem so high ‘because there are no children under them’. Since this change runs counter to the direction Soviet censorship might have imposed, Galia Ackerman and Frédérick Lemarchand read it as ‘an embellishment that makes the portrait of Thekla Struy more expressive: a Soviet woman proud of her past and, at the same time, fragile and dependent’ – a motif repeated throughout the book to depict the composite veteran as ‘a humble heroine who clings on to her past’.

Even the older version of Struy’s narrative, however, reveals how tightly the figure of the disabled female veteran is circumscribed. The only physically disabled veteran who (as constructed in the book) can speak of her post-war life is one whose public presentation of self has matched the post-war Soviet script for male veterans’ resilience and rehabilitation as closely as possible, just like the disabled male veterans who ‘fashion[ed] themselves as suffering but still striving subjects’ while narrating their lives. Women who suffered worse fates are only glimpsed in other women’s stories, through lenses of pity or apprehension. While Struy did not become a mother, and (if living with her sister) probably did not marry, her post-war life was at least narratable in a socially and politically recognisable form. The text does not inform the reader whether any other interviewees lived with war disabilities, or how many other women silenced as disabled veterans and as women veterans even believed they had an intelligible subject position to be interviewed from.
Disability and disfigurement function in *Unwomanly Face* less to document disabled women’s experiences, more to harness the reader’s emotions in the service of Alexievich’s resistance to the militarisation of Soviet society during her childhood and then the Soviet–Afghan War. The unwomanly face is, in part, the symbol of Alexievich’s and her subjects’ realisations that the glorious Soviet victory had had a darker side: ‘for a long time I did not believe that our Victory had two faces – one beautiful and the other terrible, all scars – unbearable to look at’.99 Combat itself transforms the face into something inhuman: Alexievich quotes Omelchenko saying that ‘[r]ight after an attack it’s better not to look at faces; they’re some kind of totally different faces, not like people usually have’.100 Yet once we know the repeated motif is a deliberate aesthetic device for Alexievich, war’s unwomanly face also becomes the agonised face of the soldier with the fractured thigh whom the nurse had to force herself to look upon as her transition into experiencing war, and the burned face of the girl soldier whose disfigurement, and its implications, haunted the sniper’s mother until she came home. The identities of ‘girl’ and ‘soldier’, Alexievich suggests by including anecdotes where the categories clash, ought normatively to be incompatible, by virtue of gender combined with age: for girls imbued with Soviet mythology of war and duty to have fought en masse is depicted as a national catastrophe and inversion of the proper social order, militarisation’s ultimate consequence.

**Conclusion**

The technique of representing war’s effects through intimate sensory depictions of the war-damaged body, Alexievich hints in both *Unwomanly Face* and *Boys in Zinc*, is an aesthetic device aimed at making the reader feel war’s horrific emotional consequences and thus to distance themselves from societal militarisation. A section of the introduction to *Boys in Zinc* presented as Alexievich’s diary from visiting Kabul in 1988 directly opposes her to ‘military socialism, a military country, military thinking . . . A human being cannot endure trials like this’, and positions her writing as striving ‘to reduce history to the human being’.101 The body, its ordinariness and its dismemberment, are devices for harnessing the reader’s imagination to this effect:

All the physical details are important: the way blood changes in the sun, the human being just before he passes away. Life is incredibly artistic in itself and – cruel as this may sound – human suffering is especially artistic. The dark side of art. Just yesterday I saw them assembling the pieces of boys who had been blown up by an anti-tank mine.102
Ironically, the witnessing and representation of war-dismembered bodies is also the ground on which Alexievich (or the character she becomes in her narrative) has her own authority challenged by an Afghan War veteran. The threatening telephone call with which Alexievich introduces each chapter in *Boys in Zinc* comes from a voice representing himself as a veteran, speaking for his comrades. The voice rejects her claim to write or know about war by appealing to what Yuval Harari calls ‘flesh-witnessing’, an unshakeable moral authority born of direct embodied experience of war:

> Keep your hands off! My best friend, he was my brother, I brought him back from a raid in a plastic sack . . . The head separate, the arms and legs all separate . . . The skin ripped off him, like a wild boar . . . A butchered carcass . . . And he used to play the violin and write poetry. He could have written about it, but not you . . .

Even if Alexievich has seen bodies in similar states, she has not had to witness a loved one’s body so destroyed, and therefore – this figure or character implies – has no right to claim she knows war. The way Alexievich uses this dialogue (which she has ‘imagined’ in terms of incorporating it into literary narrative, even if it has originated in fact) to restate and justify her epistemology of writing about war is reminiscent of the ‘imagined conversations with . . . authors’ that Synne Dyvik writes of inventing while trying to make sense of how and why she researches military memoirs, which also claim authority through ‘flesh-witnessing’ of war.

Alexievich’s aesthetics of embodiment in her war narratives lie, however, not just in evoking sensory detail as emotional stimulus and literary device – a mode of perception that she suggests in *Unwomanly Face* is uniquely female, even though the veterans’ as well as mothers’ testimonies in *Boys in Zinc* depend on it – but also in the motif of the physically disabled body, stripped of any social role after the self has experienced war. Witnesses’ senses on the battlefield and civilians’ senses at home are more important in these aesthetics than how disabled bodies themselves sense and perceive. As prose, her characters’ testimonies about physical disability and disfigurement engage the senses through subtly different means from audiovisual film or still images of veterans whose bodies war has made non-normate. ‘In literature’, the disability scholar Ato Quayson writes, ‘the disabled are fictional characters created out of language’, even when they represent real interviewees. The reader seeing, or sometimes hearing, these bodies described in language must picture their appearance in their own mind. *Unwomanly Face*’s
lenses for understanding disabled women veterans’ experiences, however, remain frames which were dominant in Soviet society: the resilient Party member, the unfulfilled potential mother and the pitiful reminder of war’s toll. The sadness Alexievich tries to elicit through examples of disabled women unable to marry or have children seems a proxy, or a ‘narrative prosthesis’, for how she wants the reader to feel about the social fate of Red Army women writ large.

Disability studies thus illuminate the gender dynamics Alexievich constructs in the course of grounding her resistance to militarisation in the use of ‘women’s stories’ of intimacy and grief to challenge the heroic narratives of men. They also reveal the socio-cultural and socio-economic anxieties surrounding the disabled female veteran, who even in Alexievich’s collection speaks less than casualty figures would suggest she should. The experiences of Soviet women veterans disabled in World War II, and the anxieties mediated (in everyday life or in Alexievich’s prose) through the symbol of the crippled or disfigured Red Army woman, are specific to Stalinist and late Soviet gender regimes and body politics, though have commonalities with experiences elsewhere. Indeed, perhaps even ‘militarisation’ as a concept might not fully describe how Soviet Communist ideology had always conceived of society as a collective whose members existed to do their sacrificial duty in revolution, shock work or war – another dimension, though a less racialised one, of where Alison Howell argues ‘militarisation’ falls short, that is, the implication that populations construed as threats to public health or order enjoyed a peaceful state before militarisation began. Through the literary manipulation of testimony to sharpen its aesthetic effects, Alexievich’s claim to give voice to Soviet women veterans frames itself as resisting this systemic militarism by appealing to women’s experiences as truth. While Alexievich’s imaginary collective subject amalgamates important differences in age, class, education, ethnicity and political background into one essential category of ‘woman’, her intervention against militarisation rests on an aesthetics of embodiment that did not trouble prevailing scripts about the disabled body, drawing the reader into staring at the unwomanly face of war.

Notes
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3. For example Bourke, *Dismembering*, 214.


7. Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 37. See also Caso, this volume.


30. Thomas, *Female Forms*, 47.


41. Ibid., 672.


50. See Bischl, ‘Soldiers’.
52. Ibid., 131.
59. Ibid., 310.
60. Ibid., 326.
61. Ibid., 326.
67. Ibid., xiii.
70. Ibid., 330.
74. Bush, “‘Proof’”, 216.
78. Myers, ‘Narrative’, 346.
81. Bush, ““Proof””, 218–19. The 2017 translation renders the wounded woman’s line ‘I don’t want to live like this’, and includes the paragraph as part of Klavdia Grigoryevna Krokhina’s story, though Bush (““Proof””, 218) attributes it to Krokhina’s friend Mariia Ivanova Morozova, and indeed a line on the previous page of the translation relates the speaker being addressed as ‘Maruska’ (a diminutive of Mariia), not a name derived from Klavdia: Alexievich, Unwomanly Face, 15–16.
83. Davis, Normalcy, 43.
84. Alexievich, Unwomanly Face, 59, 62, 136.
85. Ibid., 10–11.
86. Ibid., 135.
88. See Edele, Soviet Veterans, 92–5.
89. Alexievich, Unwomanly Face, 155.
90. Ibid., 83.
91. Ibid., 107–8.
92. Ibid., 272.
93. Ibid., 273.
95. Ibid., 17–19.
96. Ibid., 17–19.
97. Ibid., 25.
99. Alexievich, Unwomanly Face, xli.
100. Ibid., 135.
105. Alexievich, Boys, 23.