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World War II in Literature: Lessons for the Future

Education and its practice, with the intent to benefit the following generation as a vehicle to improve society, is one of the most important endeavors one can aim to achieve. The source materials and lessons gathered within this course have embedded seeds of thought which can manifest in a variety of ways further down the road. The most pertinent of which was to learn just how deep and everlasting the trauma of World War II was in the past, continues to be in the present, and has the potential to be in the future. This paramount lesson can help avoid such a widespread and evil man-made catastrophe to ever occur again.

Svetlana Alexievich, a Belarusian writer and recipient of the 2015 Nobel Prize, displays the trauma of entire generation (and more) in her novel, *The Unwomanly Face of War: An Oral History of Women in World War II*. “In her books, Alexievich gives voice to individuals underrepresented in the official discourse, and emphasizes explicitly or implicitly, women’s voices” (Novikau 316). While it can certainly be argued that Alexievich’s handling of her source material through her interviews is concerning, it is difficult to argue against the fact that the narratives expressed are gut-wrenching and simultaneously of great importance, regardless of whether it provides few new insights (Pinkham 59). Apart from lending a spotlight and a voice to those unseen and previously unheard, Alexievich indirectly shows how vast the reach of war truly was. *The Unwomanly Face of War: An Oral History of Women in World War II* gives its

audience a peek at the multitude of lives which were permanently affected, and often, completely derailed as a result of the war. “For us everything took its origin from that frightening and mysterious world” (Alexievich xiv).

A fellow Nobel laureate of Alexievich, Günter Grass, portrays generational trauma in a tragically brilliant manner in his 2002 novel *Crabwalk*. By portraying how the sinking of *Wilhelm Gustloff*, a German cruise-ship turned war vessel, massively affected three separate generations within the same German family, Grass provides a grim vision of how the events from nearly 80 years ago can continue to haunt mankind. Grass’ final line of the book is haunting. “It doesn’t end. Never will it end” (234). Here, the German writer suggests that the scars, the hatred and evil inherited from all those years ago, will never cease to live on. He is likely right but only to a certain extent.

Hatred and discrimination are unfortunately too lofty of pillars to suggest potential diminishing anytime soon, if ever. That said, by bringing the consequences and the factual inspirations or causes of all this hatred and fighting and war to the light, perhaps the generations to come will see the flaws in their nature. The lessons throughout this course have proven that the evils of yesterday belong to the present just as much as the past. They are, in fact, not dead. Now more than ever, and this does not apply exclusively to World War II, it is imperative that the educators of the world accurately illuminate the youth and students of our time so that we get that much closer to a future where wars of this magnitude seem less and less likely to reoccur.

Works Cited

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- Novikau, Aliaksandr. "Women, Wars and Militarism in Svetlana Alexievich's Documentary Prose" (2017).
- Pinkham, Sophie. "Witness Tampering." *New Republic*. 1 Sept. 2016, pp. 58-61.