Title: Svetlana Alexievich's Voices from Chernobyl: Between Oral History and a Funeral Lament
Author: Anna Karpusheva, The University of Kansas

Abstract:
In her Noble Prize-winning prose, Svetlana Alexievich uses the genre of oral history to create polyphonic reflections on the most defining historical events of the Soviet people: World War II, the Afghanistan war, the Chernobyl nuclear catastrophe, and the collapse of the Soviet Union. The reduction of the narrator's function in Alexievich's prose palpably brings forth the silent heroism, blind patriotism, betrayed hopes, and sorrow experienced by numerous participants of those events. However, the emotional range in Voices from Chernobyl is even wider. In addition to all the enumerated sentiments, the Chernobyl narrative is full of deadly grief and fear for the future. The overall artistic effect of this work is that of an on-going collective mourning.

This paper proposes that Voices from Chernobyl can be compared to Slavic funeral laments and productively analyzed through this folkloric genre. First, I explain how the overall goal of the Chernobyl survivors' testimonies is similar to the functions of funeral laments, namely, to process the loss and face the future. Second, I analyze structural elements of funeral lamentation in the Chernobyl narrative, such as the reproach and questioning of the death and the deceased, the complaint about the plight of the mourner and the deceased, and anticipation of the deceased's visit from the other world. Third, I explore how the reduction of the narrator's role in the narrative gives room to the traditional cast of Slavic laments: mourners, the deceased, and death. Finally, I identify the major themes of laments in Voices from Chernobyl (transition to another world, separation from the community, and afterlife) and examine how they manifest in the narrative. The analysis shows how the individual oral histories in Voices from Chernobyl are brought together to create a larger whole that resembles one extended funeral lamentation.