A CHRONOTOPIC STUDY OF WOMEN'S WAR EXPERIENCE IN THE WORKS OF S. ALEXIEVICH, AN ANONYMOUS AUTHOR[1], AND I. GREKOVA

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Abstract: *This article studies the women's perspective on war and its effects on the female characters in three significant works written by women, namely "The Ship of Widows" (1994) by I. Grekova, "A Woman in Berlin" (2011) by an Anonymous author, and "U vojny ne zhenskoe litso" (2013) ("The Unwomanly Face of War") by S. Alexievich. The purpose of this research is to display, for the first time collectively, how women's perspective on war is narrated not by men but by women themselves who have experienced WWII or its aftermath effects in their lives. Despite a significant literature/bibliography on WWII, the latter primarily reflects the male view, making the three selected books exceptional. Furthermore, unlike the previously available articles on the aforementioned texts, our article originally conducts a collective and comparative study of them. Women's studies have separately dealt with these three literary works, highlighting the women's experiences and ordeals of war. Instead, we focus on the setting of the stories. The communal buildings in the first two works and the war front in the third one gain a significant historical and personal dimension that can be framed and explained by Bakhtin's concept of chronotope, where according to Lefebvre "time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history" (1994, p.84). In terms of explaining the nature of the spatiality in these literary oeuvre, H. Lefebvre's concepts of "dominated space" and "appropriated space" are employed.*

Key words: *chronotope, dominated space, appropriated space, wartime, women's experiences of war*

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1 In this study, the 2011 Virago Modern Classics edition is used and the author is mentioned as anonymous. The actual author is Marta Hilllers, but to the best of our knowledge, her name has not appeared on the book cover.

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This study examines the use of space to represent women's experiences, struggles, and traumas during WWII in three books written by women, namely "A Woman in Berlin," anonymous (2011), "The Ship of Widows" by Irina Grekova (1994), and "The Unwomanly Face of War" by Svetlana Alexievich (2013). These groundbreaking books have been studied earlier in several articles and dissertations from many different angles but have never been compared and investigated from this perspective of Lefebvre's notions of dominated and appropriated space and the Bakhtinian concept of chronotope. The three books discussed in this article present narratives in which female characters are depicted in wartime settings fighting to survive during the war. The theories of Bakhtin and Lefebvre allow the critic to pay attention to the represented places not only as wartime spaces but also as sites of gender and class conflict and struggle. In other words, they provide us with the necessary tools to explore and understand the nature of wartime spaces and how they give voice to women's experience of war. Bakhtin's chronotope provides a way of joining the temporal dimension of the war with its spatial dimension narrated in all three books, enabling the authors to regard the places where the actions occur as wartime spaces. Lefebvre's concepts of "dominated space" and "appropriated space," on the other hand, describe space as a part of social originating superstructures, which are represented by institutions and the state itself (1991, p. 85). For Lefebvre, dominated space is authoritarian, technologically oriented, and repressive. He writes: "Thanks to technology, the domination of space is becoming, as it were, completely dominant. The dominance has its root in.... history and in the historical sphere, for its origins coincide with those of political power itself... Dominated space is usually closed, sterilised, emptied out." (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 164-165) According to Isobel Armstrong, who comments on the relevance of Lefebvre's theories in the study of space in the 19th-century novel, appropriated space is "the space of limited freedom" (Armstrong, 2013, p. 18). Therefore, it is totally in contrast with dominated space. As Lefebvre describes it, "It is a natural space modified in order to serve the needs and possibilities of a group that it has been appropriated by that group" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 165).

One important motivation for the authors' choice of comparing the aforementioned books and analyse the theme of women's experiences of war was the fact that, although there is a vast literature on WWII, for the most part, the war events and the impact of the war on civilians are described from a male point of view. Consequently, in male literary works, women appear as secondary characters who are not actively involved in the conflict but perform their duties as mothers, family members, lovers, wives, or as professionals in traditionally female jobs such as nurses, cooks, and maidservants. A characteristic aspect of all three analysed books is their direct focus on women, on how they went through all phases of war, during and after, on what kind of experiences they had, and on how they survived depending solely on their own strengths and seemingly meagre sources. At this point, it may be worthwhile to outline shortly the main features of the texts discussed, pointing out common and contrasting features.

As has already been mentioned, all books deal with the same wartime space and nearly the same period, reflecting a similar gender-related focal point. Unquestionably, all three authors share the view of condemning the destructive outcome of war on people. In this way, the texts contribute to the anti-war movement. The journalist Alexievich, who won the 2015 Nobel Literature Prize, confessed in an interview her reason for writing her oeuvre: "I would like to write a book so that even a hint of war would be disgusting and made people sick. Even military generals." (Alexievich, 2013, p.10) Indeed, Alexievich's book presents devastating, heart-wrenching, and horrible records of women who participated in the war and portrayed their post-war lives as completely and unequivocally destructed. Even readers of the 21st century are thrown into despair and agony for all those ruined youths and lives destroyed.

In "A Woman in Berlin," the anonymous female character records her daily troubles immediately after the end of the war when the Soviet and American armies occupied Berlin. She is left homeless and jobless. She seeks shelter in a building where every flat is shared by several people who are total strangers to each other but who experience the same misery and hardships. The scale of devastation is reflected on the other end of the warring parties by the Berliner woman who portrays the reality of her and all the Berliners' sufferings as such: "At the moment, we are marching back in time. Cave dwellers." (2011, p. 21) The book is a first-hand narration of how life was during and immediately after the surrender of Germany. The name of the narrator is never mentioned, similar to the anonymity of the author of the book, and all the events evolves around how the she-narrator tries to survive amid the chaos and devastation of the war and the occupation. She goes through a series of incidents in order to barely survive and make a very precarious living, meeting with all kinds of people and ordeals while trying to do so.

"The Ship of Widows" gives an account of the lives of five women who are assigned by the government authorities to share their existence in a large communal apartment when the war is still raging throughout Europe and the USSR. They continue to live together in it even after the end of the conflict. The novel presents predominantly the woman's world of the narrator, but her story is interconnected with the past and present of all the rest of her flatmates. This female community has rather turbulent relations, but is united by their care for the growth of a baby boy. In dire living conditions, the latter gives all the women the joy of motherly love and compassion.

In the foreword written by Helena Goscilo to the novel "The Ship of Widows", the place and weight of women during WWII are described as follows:

> The war split Russian society into two separate spheres - the battlefront and the domestic front. Although that division followed gender lines, women comprised approximately 8 percent of the armed forces. They not only worked in transport, the medical corps and clerical positions but also joined in combat as machine gunners, tank drivers, snipers, sappers, navigators, and bomber pilots. Women replaced men

> in industry, agriculture, and medicine on the domestic front. Besides their direct, tangible contribution to the war effort, women also fulfilled the key psychological role of morale boosters and "safe keepers of the domestic flame" – they provided a haven for the returnees from the battlefront... Their unglamorous, dogged fortitude solidified forever, it seems, the image of Soviet womanhood as eternally patient, nurturing, and capable of withstanding any travails... It is to the women who capacitated this image that "The Ship of Widows" pays a moving yet unsentimental tribute (Goscilo, 1994, p. xvi).

It is noteworthy to mention that while "A Woman in Berlin" and "The Unwomanly Face of War" are written by journalists who tried to deliver the facts meticulously using their literary skills, the author of "The Ship of Widows" is a mathematician by profession who reflects and transforms her personal experience of living behind the frontline in the USSR during WWII into a narrative text. The three books are inspired by true stories and, as such, enable the authors of this article to conduct an in-depth analysis of the existence and survival of women during wartime through the prism of Lefebvre's dominated and appropriated space concepts. The important issue that attracted the authors' attention to these works is that women are not voiced or made visible in this landscape of war via men's perception and points of view, but they express their lives, traumas, and hardships by their own accounts.

As it has been explained earlier, Lefebvre's concepts are employed in our study because female characters in all three books create for themselves the conditions for their survival in the chronotope of "dominated" space of war and wartime. They transform the space they live in sheltering and nurturing "homes" in the Bachelardian sense. According to the latter: "all really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home. This is the environment in which protective beings live...the sites of our intimate lives" (Bachelard, 2014, pp. 27, 29-30). In "The Ship of Widows," Olga describes her "appropriated space" or "assumed home" as follows:

> I began to look for my own living space... my own corner, my own four walls. The regional Soviet quite quickly allocated me a room whose previous occupants had either died or moved out. It turned out to be quite small...The previous occupants had left a bed, evidently abandoned because it was useless (Grekova, 1994, p. 6).

The urge for home as not only a place but some kind of shelter against the cruelty and horrors of the environment is expressed by the narrator in "A Woman in Berlin" as: "Back in the attic apartment. I cannot really call it a home. I no longer have a home. Not that the furnished room I was bombed out of was really mine either. All the same, I'd filled it with six years of my life." (2011, p.18) In "The Ship of Widows", Olga explains her situation after she is discharged from the hospital:

> Yes, I loved it all, I would have liked to keep this emptiness, this simplicity, this brightness. I didn't want to acquire a lot of things. They say ships encrusted with barnacles lose speed, and I didn't want to lose speed, even though I had nowhere to go (Grekova, 1994, p.7).

Meanwhile, in Alexievich, a woman character records her memories:

> I remembered the Leningrad siege... Especially an incident which shocked us all. We were told that an old woman opened her window every day and poured down on the street a mug of water, and she managed to aim further away each time. Initially, we thought she was crazy-there was all sorts of weirdness during the siege – all the same, we decided to ask her why. You know what she said to us? If the fascists come to Leningrad and dare to come to my Street, I will pour boiling water on them. I am old; this is the only thing I can do... So, she was practising.... Everyday... This was how she could fight... Everybody thought of what to do to protect the city. Death was too easy; something else had to be done. An action... (Alexievich, 2013, p. 86).

The books under study are considered within the paradigm of Bakhtinian chronotope as well. They contain a definite juxtaposition of time (wartime) and space as the Berlin communals in "A Woman in Berlin," a Muscovite communal flat in "The Ship of Widows," and the frontline with all the other war spaces in "The Unwomanly Face of War." As Alexievich affirms in a metaphoric way, "Time is also a homeland" (Alexievich, 2013, p. 15). The concept of Bakhtinian chronotope affirms itself as a physical and concrete entity which cannot be separated from time. As Isobel Armstrong writes, according to Bakhtin, "history becomes visible as space, and the "when" and "where" of the novel, as Franco Moretti elegantly puts it, come together in a unique convergence, one that could only occur at this juncture in the narrative and at that historical moment" (2013, p. 2). Bakhtin makes time visible and moving, a consisting space in itself. It becomes the chronotope of the narration. The spaces, in which the female characters in all three books live, are real spaces bound to reality in terms of their connection with time. Hence, the spatial and temporal dimensions of the chronotope in all three books converge to form the manifestation and the space of how these women experience and endure war and its aftermath. On the other hand, since the characters fail to provide themselves with a home in the Bachelardian sense, which offers them shelter, comfort, safety, security and continuity of a domestic space called "home", Henri Lefebvre's appropriated space concept helps us to understand how these women characters manage to survive despite the lack of a proper "home". In "The Ship of Widows," the narrator writes :

> These were my neighbours in the flat, and with these people I was destined to live. They're my family now-formed not by choice but by chance... So, for me, doubly bereft, this was the only possible form of the family now, and if this hadn't existed, I wouldn't have been able to bear it (Grekova, 1994, p. 17).

> In her study of the significance of the communal living in the Soviet Union, Erin Collopy observes how Olga, the narrator in "The Ship of Widows," tries to normalise her communal living: "Despite everything, it is apparent that Olga appreciates what solace her living situation brings her. Her apartment mates are a sort of family, perhaps as dysfunctional as any" (Collopy, 2005, p. 8).

Lefebvre clarifies his concept of appropriated space by stating that "Private space is distinct from, but always connected with, public space. In the best of circumstances, the outside space of the community is dominated, while the

indoor space of family life is appropriated." (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 165) The concept of appropriated space against the dominated space of war can be seen in the three books as the fulfilment of the yearning for the Bachelardian home in the communal flat in "The Ship of Widows", in the communal lodging in "A Woman in Berlin", and in the war front, or the bunkers, or the open fields in the "The Unwomanly Face of War." Anna Strumilima, a guerilla warrior recalls:

> I was not afraid of darkness anymore. Nor of animals, Except the snakes... At nights, she-wolves, would howl. We would remain in our dugouts - nothing would happen... The wolves were wild, hungry. We had very small dugouts, like caves. The wood was our home (Alexievich, 2013, p. 95).

The same metaphor of a cave as a protection from the outside danger can be traced in "A Woman in Berlin": "...people here are convinced that their cave is one of the safest. There is nothing more alien than an unknown shelter. ... Every place has its own set of quirks and regulations." (2011, p. 23) In "The Ship of Widows," Olga describes her appropriated home in the following manner:

> Home...
>
> Work is one thing, but we all need a home to go back to where we can take off our working clothes, put on a dressing – gown and live.
>
> The flat was in a large, gloomy, six-storey building constructed sometime around the turn of the century.... Now it was run down, peeling and dilapidated: the lift didn't work, the plaster was falling off...There were four rooms in the flat besides mine: three women lived in three of them, one in each room, and the fourth was locked while its owners, Fyodor and Anfisa Gromov, were away at the front (Grekova, 1994, p. 17).

In "The Unwomanly Face of War" Valentina Chudaeva, an artillery sergeant severely wounded during the battle, describes her yearnings:

> How I wanted to go home. Even though there was no father or mother. Home – it is something that is more significant than people living there and even greater than the home itself. This is something special... Every person must have a home... (Alexievich, 2013, p. 87).

In his article on Irina Grekova, Benjamin Massey Sutcliffe mentions the concept of "chronotope of crisis" since Grekova's novel uses non-linear and self-erasing time in conjunction with communal and liminal space as a focal point for commentary on the burden on Anfisa as an inhabitant of the communal dwelling and the ordeals of motherhood within this juxtaposition (Sutcliffe, 2004, p. 80). Using the same concept of "chronotope of crisis," Sutcliffe points out that Grekova in "The Ship of Widows" established women's everyday lives as a legitimate, sometimes controversial, theme. The use of the chronotope of crisis focuses attention on gender-specific (hospital, communal apartment, line) and the repetitive nature of women's time (Sutcliffe, 2004, p. 80). Hence, the chronotope of crisis is portrayed as an unenviable environment like the inescapable reality of Olga Ivanovna and, by extension, of the intelligentsia. Moreover, the chronotope of crisis becomes visible in the character of Olga, who was once a piano player, but

now yells in the kitchen and argues over who should wash the hallway (Sutcliffe, 2004, p. 43).

The same concept can be traced/found in "A Woman in Berlin," where the linear time constructs the gender-specific emotions and the communal mundane life. The chronotope of crisis is seen as such in the following instances:

> Breakfast in the basement. Everyone is trying as best as they can to recreate some semblance of family life. A genteel morning meal served on trunks, crates and chairs, with paper napkins and little tablecloths.... The widow conjured up some real coffee and cooked it on a fire made of broken champagne crates – that did us good. But people are fidgety, cranky, getting on one another's nerves (Grekova, 2011, pp. 54-55).

Nevertheless, the literary methods of presenting the universal concepts of gender factors, pacifism and humanity through emotional and deeply impressive stories are significantly different among the texts. Not only do the authors have various and differing war experiences, but also their writing styles are not alike. The books represent three distinct genres. Journalistic narrative via a great number of commented interviews characterizes "The Unwomanly Face of War." "A Woman in Berlin" is a kind of diary and memoirs. "The Ship of Widows" is a fictional work. As a result, in "The Unwomanly Face of War", we find stories told by women, who participated in the battlefields of WWII, along with their attitudes, feelings, flashbacks, and judgements.

Contrasting the presentation of about 100 stories in "The Unwomanly Face of War," "A Woman in Berlin" uses only everyday notes of a single woman describing her confined neighbourhood. However, the reader understands that the author reveals a typical portrait of women in Berlin.

As for "The Ship of Widows," the author of the metaphorical ship paints a bright picture of life, where each character is an unforgettable personality. The characters range in their status from an uneducated, low-qualified worker, Panya, to a former theatre actress, Ada, trying even during the war to live in her imaginary world of music and romantic feelings. Every story, however laconic, calls for the reader's sympathy, even for the seemingly negative characters.

It should be emphasised that despite all the differences, the books share a common thought: women showed resilience and had the common – sometimes covert – goal not only to survive the war but also to have a home, family, love, and stability. They follow different paths to reach this goal: immediate involvement in military actions in "The Unwomanly Face of War," building their small worlds bounded by rooms in a communal flat in "The Ship of Widows," and establishing "sex for food" relations with enemy soldiers in "A Woman in Berlin."

The characters of all three works are described as going through various stages of physical and emotional experiences, ordeals, and traumas of differentiating degrees in similar and/or dissimilar environments. They represent various social backgrounds, education levels, ideological views, professions,

nationalities, and age groups. The striking difference stems from the fact that the woman in "A Woman in Berlin" represents the people of the aggressor but defeated country, while the characters of the other two works act as defenders of their homeland. At the same time, they lived under harsh regimes, which made them all victims of the historical events and circumstances of WWII.

Furthermore, it can be stated that the characters are united by the overwhelming will to survive and have a family as well as a home. So the limited space they try to live in is appropriated as "home" in the Lefebvrian sense, allowing them to create an illusion of a safe home where they can maintain their longing for a family and a cherished life. The small details sprinkled in all stories demonstrate that "home" is not just a place to live but also a place of individual cosiness. In "The Ship of Widows," after coming back from the frontline, Anfisa is worried about her flowers despite war hardships and her own desperate situation:

> Anfisa wasn't listening. She was looking at her plants. She had kept a lot of plants and flowers once. They'd been the best in the whole house. Now there were just some withered buddleias in jam jars. She felt so sorry for the flowers, more sorry than anything. (Grekova, 1994, p. 24)

In "The Unwomanly Face of War" a lieutenant pilot Anna Dubrovina-Chekunova remembers: "I brought flowers from my room and asked neighbours: please water the flowers" (Alexievich, 2013, p. 92), just before leaving for the battlefield.

The same theme is present in "A Woman in Berlin". In the narrator's words: "I planted some chervil and borage in the rotting balcony boxes, that is to say, I made some shallow grooves and sprinkled in the brown grains and tiny black seeds that are supposed to become my kitchen garden." (2011, p. 234).

Resilience and a will to survive and turn back to life are common traits in all female characters, and they were not even expected by the women themselves.

In "The Unwomanly Face of War", Anna Strumilina, a guerilla warrior, states: "I am not a hero... I was a pretty girl, spoiled by parents. Then the war came. I did not want to die; I was afraid to shoot. Oh, I was afraid of the dark, of the wild forest." (Alexievich, 2021, p. 95). And this woman was a warrior during the whole war!

Life far from the frontline also required strength to overcome hardships and losses of war.

The narrator in "A Woman in Berlin" writes: "I feel something nagging at me, boring into me. I can't go on living like a plant, I need to move, I have to act, start doing something." (2011, p. 235)

In "The Ship of Widows", Olga, a severely crippled former musician who lost all her family and ability to continue her professional career clings to life in her own words:

> ...I had already started to lose hope when I was suddenly offered a job! The offer terrified me and stirred up the depth of my lack of confidence. I didn't know anything, couldn't do anything. But it was a job, and I had to work in order to live. And I had to live – for some unknown reason I absolutely have to live! (Grekova, 1994, p. 9)

Later, former operetta singer Ada Efimovna displays the same theme of the will to survive, insisting that "War's war, but you still have to look after yourself. You can't get yourself go for too long... In fact, a woman should take special care of herself in a war. One should cultivate both art and nature..." (Grekova, 1994, p. 40)

Despite the wartime environment, which is against a woman's nature – the unwomanly face of war – all women do not abandon the urge and hope for ordinary female life, accepting, albeit unwillingly, some form of its ersatz. Here are some examples, encircling the theme of the persisting nature of hope and the urge for survival despite the lack of a home, but its assumed ersatz, and validating Lefebvre's concept of "appropriated space", despite all the adverse chronotopic instances.

As can be seen in the following examples, amidst the horrors of the war, we can find the following confessions, which show that women still pursue love and compassion or at least some form of romance in their miserable lives:

To the question "Did you fall in love?", Svetlana Lyubich, a nurse, replies: "Certainly, we were so young." (Alexievich, 2013, p. 307)

Lyubov Grozd, combat medic tells us that: "It was a true love. He was killed and we were burying him. He was lying on his soldier trench coat. I approached and kissed him... It was my first kiss." (Alexievich, 2013, p. 312–313)

Nina Mihay, a sergeant nurse, reveals the story of one of her friends:

> The troop commander and nurse Lyuba Silina... They were in love! Everybody knew it... Whenever the commander went to fight, the nurse would follow... She would say she would never forgive herself if she would not be by his side when he died. "Let them kill us together. Just one bullet would do." They were to either die or live together. There was no tomorrow for love, just today (Alexievich, 2013, p. 309).

In "The Ship of Widows," Anfisa's story of the war-time love for a wounded soldier, Grigorii, is described as such:

> And it was there that Anfisa first discovered what love was. She used to think she loved Fyodor [her husband] – little did she know then! There was simply no comparison. This affair with Grigorii was the real thing: everything was new and special, the whole world changed, ... Love changed her; she grew prettier, ... She wasn't afraid of bombing now (Grekova, 1994, p.35).

Whatever blows they had endured, all the women characters put efforts into managing their life and homes after the war ended.

Klavdiya, a sniper in "The Unwomanly Face of War", says: "I dreamed of love. Wished home and family. To feel children's smell at home." (Alexievich, 2021, p. 315)

Meanwhile, Olga in "The Ship of Widows," crippled during bombardment, appreciates some private talks with her neighbour war veteran Fyedor:

> ...so Fyodor loved me, but what about me? Of course not, I couldn't love anyone, least of all Fyodor. Why then the thought of his love makes me so happy? ... Could it be that in me, too, there lived a woman begging for charity? That I, this freakish creature without sex or age, with my lameness and my stick, was still a woman who needed to be loved? (Grekova, 1994, p. 83)

The narrator of "A Woman in Berlin" describes her drama when meeting her fiancé after her forced sex with the Soviet army soldiers. The fiancé Gerd is ashamed and disgusted of her: "It's horrible being around you. You've lost all sense of measure." Then Gerd left without any notice of his possible return to her. Despite this, there is a hint of light at the end of tunnel: "Does Gerd still think of me? Maybe, we'll find our way back to each other yet." (2011, p. 307–308). Agatha Schwartz, in her detailed study and analysis of "A Woman in Berlin" from the perspective of shameful assaults towards women in Berlin and their ensuing long-term traumas, points out that women still found outlets to survive and told their stories to a public who would rather close their eyes to such a severe and collective women issue:

> A Woman in Berlin offers an account of this atmosphere of lawlessness in which, according to Pötzsch, women became reduced as per Giorgio Agamben's term to "bare life" meaning that "their bodies become disposable objects that can be mistreated or killed without legal consequences for the perpetrator" (20). However, the anonymous narrator and other women characters maintain a sense of agency and develop ways to survive. We can speculate that the women's refusal to be reduced to "bare life" was what made the initial reception of the diary controversial in the years of the German economic miracle marked by a desire to move on and to forget (Schwartz, 2015, p. 15).

In conclusion, the attitudes, experiences, and ordeals of women belonging to different nations and backgrounds, but sharing similar time/space frames have been explored in this study primarily to display women's perspectives on war and its traumatic effects on their lives from their own mouths. Secondly but not least importantly, the research contributes to the study of women and war theme through the use of three distinguished scholars' concepts to understand how the nature of wartime spaces are represented in these works in order to reveal how all these women narrators respond to war and its impact on their existences.In this article we have also argued that the "wartime space" is tied to diverse places, such as communal flats and frontline. Demonstrating women's perspective of war, the authors emphasise the importance of "home" as not just a "place", but a private domain, which is a fixed point of life, regardless of how unhuman and turbulent time is. Additionally, the three books show the destructive impact of war on the lives of women who were deprived of "homes" and who tried to find substitutes for them.

It should be underlined that our synthesised study of the selected works provides a wide diapason of stories in which diverse backgrounds and wartime situations show common attitudes of women, such as hope against despair and resilience after defeat. In the review in the back cover of "A Woman in Berlin,", Nina Bawden sums up the situation of all the female characters, who, despite their miserable living conditions, are still capable of seeing the bright side of life: "It could have been an unbearable story if it had not been for the courage and astonishingly, the humour with which it is often told".

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