On May 8, 1945, the soldiers of the Red Army broke into Hitler’s bunker. With them was Elena Rzhevskaya, a young military interpreter. She and other members of the Soviet military witnessed firsthand the charred remains of Hitler and Eva Braun. Important documents were uncovered in the search of the Berlin bunker: the notes of Martin Bormann, the head of the Nazi Party Chancellery and Hitler’s personal secretary and the diaries of propaganda minister Josef Goebbels, whose corpse lay nearby with those of his family.

Elena was entrusted with the irrefutable proof of the Hitler’s death. Tucked safely in her coat pocket, were the jawbones of Adolf Hitler, wrenched from his corpse just hours earlier. Much of the evidence uncovered from the bunker remained buried in the Soviet archives until 1994. Elena’s role as an interpreter allowed her to forge a link between the Soviet troops and the Germans. Confronted with the dramatic reality of war, she also witnessed the unfolding civilian tragedy in its messy aftermath of violence and rape perpetrated by the Soviets. Her diaries of those years became the source of her writings and this book is the capstone of a life dedicated to bearing witness to the truth.

The book includes the latest Russian edition of “Berlin, May 1945”, specially adapted for translation and circulation abroad. It incorporates such later written and published parts of the whole story, as conversation with Zhukov, letters of Shkaravsky and a novel-memoirs The Distant Rumble in which Rzhevskaya returns again to the events of the last months of the war.
The famous “Berlin, May 1945” forms the central piece of the book, but the name of the whole work is changed so that this publication is not mixed with much shorter version published about 40 years ago. The name “MEMOIRS OF A WARTIME INTERPRETER” is important for Rzhevskaya, as it was her position in war, which, together with her being a woman and a most personal and even lyrical author, never fit to about battles, but to see the suffering, the “human face” of history, makes her recollections and her books so unique. She gives the readers not only bare facts, now included in encyclopedias, but precious details, which only her memory retains, the atmosphere of these times, very precise personal characteristics.

Rzhevskaya writes about the greatest historical events and everyday life in frontlines in her own inimitable style, mixing creative prose and documents, interspersing her work with letters and diary entries (from “other side”, as well as her own), with archival material and responses from readers. The book grows before our eyes and history becomes a part of today. Rzhevskaya talks in depth of human suffering, of the bitter-sweet taste of victory, of the responsibility of an author, of strange laws of memory, which lives by associations, by heartache, compassion and unresolved feeling of guilt.

Before bringing us to Berlin, Rzevskaya leads us by the Roads and Days of the battle for Rzhev (1942-1943) and makes us listen to Distant Rumble, that reaches her from Poland, 60 plus years ago – Poland, whose liberation from the nazist hell immediately turned into new political games and more human suffering. Here she elaborates the theme of woman’s position in war, first touched in two German documentaries, where Rzhevskaya played a major part: “Lucy, Wanda, Yelena. It was not their War” (by Raimond Koplin and Renate Stegmuller, 1995) and “Befreier and Befreite” (1992), where she says the keywords about the rapes committed on German territory: “Violence is the genocide of love”.

This memoir is shocking in its relevancy, the author’s first-hand participation in the making of this history brings one very close to the events all generations should remain mindful of, including our own, polarized by the ongoing political and military conflicts around the world. There is a lesson to be learned from Rzhevskaya’s writing, and there are episodes from her personal encounters with the war from both sides of the conflict, given her role as the translator, that stick with you long after finishing the book.

Her story is a telling reminder of the jealousy and rivalries that split the Allies even in their hour of victory, and foreshadowed the Cold War. Tom Parfitt, Guardian, May 8, 2005