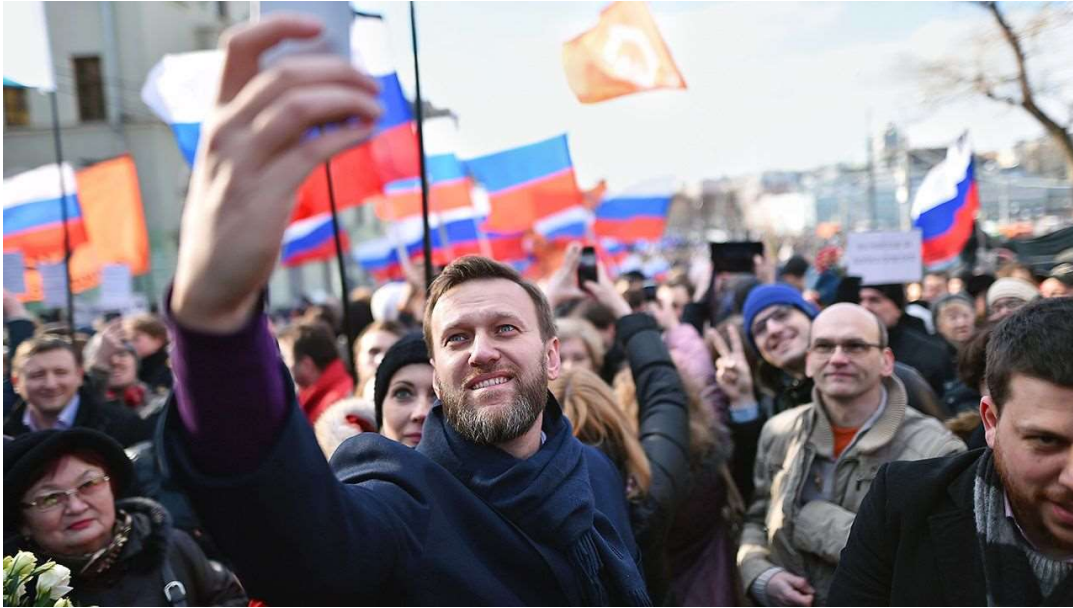


[In a posthumous memoir, Alexei Navalny chronicles his martyrdom](#)

Culture | **Opposing Putin's tyranny**

In a posthumous memoir, Alexei Navalny chronicles his martyrdom

“Patriot”, by the murdered Russian opposition leader, will be seen as a historic text



Photograph: Getty Images

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Patriot. By Alexei Navalny. Translated by Arch Tait and Stephen Dalziel. *Knopf*; 496 pages; \$35. *Bodley Head*; £25

Three and a half years before [Alexei Navalny](#) was murdered by Vladimir Putin, he was very nearly killed by him, and he described the feeling of sliding into oblivion. “It’s all lies, what they say,” he wrote. “My whole life is not flashing before my eyes. The faces of those dearest to me do not appear. Neither do angels or a dazzling light.” He sensed his brain was shutting down: “Life is draining away, and I have no will to resist...Then I died.”

In August 2020 Navalny, [Russia’s most prominent opposition leader](#), was poisoned with a nerve agent in Siberia by assassins from the [FSB](#), Russia’s security service. Flown to a hospital in Berlin, he stayed in a coma for 18 days. Less than six months later, in January 2021, he returned to Russia to face Mr [Putin](#), the tyrant who wanted him dead. His encounter with oblivion in 2020 had only strengthened his determination to face squarely up to death inside Russia.

To your correspondent, who sat two rows behind Navalny on [that flight](#), one thing was clear: Navalny’s return to Moscow was more than a physical journey. It marked his transformation from man to hero. His death earlier this year in a [prison](#) above the Arctic Circle enhanced that reputation. Now his book, “Patriot”, creates a record that will last. It has been published in 22 languages, including Russian.

Ever since he was arrested at passport control, the question his fellow prisoners and much of the world asked openly (and guards discreetly) was: why did he return to Russia, given that he would almost certainly be arrested or killed? Navalny writes that the question frustrated him. He went back to his country and his people because he had a clear sense of mission—to liberate Russia from a despot’s grip. “If your convictions mean something, you must be prepared to stand up for them and make sacrifices if necessary.”

The early chapters of “Patriot” cover his childhood in military towns near Moscow; his summers spent near Chernobyl with his Ukrainian grandmother; his courtship of his wife, Yulia; and his infatuation (and disillusionment) with [Boris Yeltsin](#), the first president of Russia after the Soviet Union’s collapse. Those

chapters—which go up to 1999, when Mr Putin came to power and Navalny entered politics—were written as he recovered in Germany. Had he stayed there, he would have written a complete memoir as an exiled politician.

But he did not. A quarter of the way into the manuscript, Navalny flew back to Moscow. He reflects on the dramatic change in his narrative with characteristic irony. “It is traditional in fiction to write something along the lines of: ‘The smooth flow of my narrative is disrupted at this point by such-and-such event.’” The remaining three-quarters of the text was written in prison. Guards tried to intercept the notes he passed from his cell and arrested three of his lawyers; they limited his access to pen and paper to 90 minutes a day. Somehow his words broke through prison walls.

“Patriot” carries echoes of works by political prisoners in Russia and elsewhere. Much like Fyodor Dostoevsky’s “The House of the Dead” (1862), Alexandr Solzhenitsyn’s “The Gulag Archipelago” (1973) and [Martin Luther King](#)’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” (1963), “Patriot” transcends its place and time. Its value lies not in what it tells you about the cruelties of Mr Putin’s regime, but in what it reveals about the human spirit.

Yet in its intensity and colloquial style, Navalny’s book is best understood as a 21st-century counterpart to one of the most important texts in Russian literature: “The Life of the Archpriest Avvakum, Written By Himself”. Avvakum was a 17th-century cleric and religious dissident who defended his faith. He was twice banished, imprisoned in [Siberia](#) and eventually executed by being burned alive. Avvakum entitled his book *zhitie*—which can be translated as “life” and interpreted as “hagiography”. A heretic in the eyes of the church and state, Avvakum wrote a book that prepared him for sainthood.

“Patriot”, too, is a passionate account of Russia’s extreme violence and a moving reflection on endurance and accepting death. It is animated by Navalny’s faith, his love for Yulia, his land and his people, as well as his hatred of those who corrupt Russia’s souls and despoil its lands.

Navalny hated Mr Putin not because this man tried to kill him, but because he suppressed individual dignity and built a state based on greed and lies, glorying in cynicism and violence. Mr Putin’s [war against Ukraine](#) was also a war against Navalny’s dream of Russia as a normal European country whose citizens could be free to make their own decisions. In a dictatorship, Navalny’s only weapon was his life.

The stronger Navalny was spiritually, the angrier Mr Putin grew. He deprived Navalny of sleep and locked him in solitary confinement, housing a yelling psychopath nearby to try to drive him mad. He sought to break Navalny’s will during a hunger strike by tantalising him with the smell of fried chicken. “Prison is the best place to improve your stamina,” Navalny wrote in December 2023, when he was moved to the Arctic penal colony. His body was wasting away, but he wrote that his mood “is great and quite Christmassy”.

Navalny collapsed suddenly, showing signs of poisoning, and died on February 16th 2024. But his story does not end there; nor does the book. An epilogue, written in March 2022, describes Navalny’s calm reaction to a new sentence of nine years in a penal colony. “I knew from the outset that I would be imprisoned for life—either for the rest of my life or until the end of the life of this regime.” He also knew that a regime does not “come crashing down in such a way that its falling debris breaks open the doors of prisons”.

He prepared for death by working on what he called his “prison Zen”. He had two techniques. One was to imagine the worst thing that could happen and accept it, skipping the stages of denial, anger and bargaining. “I will spend the rest of my life in prison and die here. There will not be anybody to say goodbye to...All anniversaries will be celebrated without me. I’ll never see my grandchildren.”

The second technique involved faith. If you are “a disciple of the religion whose founder sacrificed himself for others, paying the price for their sins” and you trust “in the immortality of the soul and the rest of that cool stuff”, then “what is there left for you to worry about?” He remained a devoted Christian until the end and trusted that “Good old Jesus and the rest of his family...won’t let me down and will sort out all my headaches. As they say in prison here: they will take my punches for me.” ■