

Book Review

I. Alinevich, *On the Way to Magadan*, with three short essays (“The Corporation”; “Self- determination”; “Political Prisoners”); forward by Vaiantsina Alinevich, afterward by Anarchist Black Cross Belarus (Anarchist Black Cross Belarus, 2014).

Distributors (English language edition):

Sabotage Ninja (Belarus Black Cross): <https://www.sabotage.ninja>

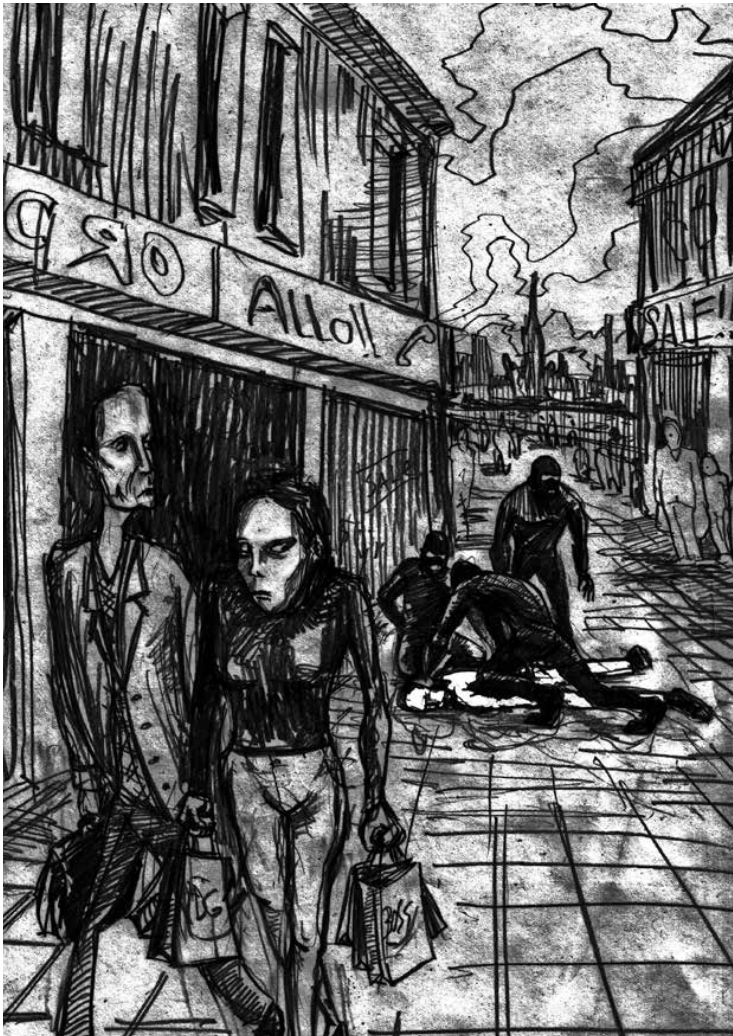
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Belarus anarchist Ihar Alinevich’s richly illustrated memoir (drawings by “Dani Dugum” and “Vasiliy Pero”)¹ takes its title from a folk song about a prisoner being transported by train to a forced labour camp in the far east of the Soviet Union. In the case of Alinevich, his journey takes place in a Belarus variation of a ‘Stolypin car’² with three sleeping tiers, no windows, and bars separating the prisoners from the corridor. Alinevich’s recounting of militant activism, abduction, incarceration, interrogation/torture, and show trial (sentence, eight years) ends with the ride to a Belarus penal colony (prison) situated between an oil refinery and a chemical plant.³

In his critical appraisal—“The Corporation”—Alinevich analyses the bureaucratic continuum from Soviet-era Communist dictatorship to Alexander Lukashenko’s post-Soviet Republic of Belarus, in which the government functions as a “family-run” affair that immensely enriches Lukashenko’s extended family and a tight-knit circle of subservient cronies. Conditions in “Americanka,” the central detention centre of the Belarus KGB, model how the regime sustains itself.

Many will recognize the acronym of the intelligence and security police—KGB; Комитет государственной безопасности (Committee for State Security)—that kept the population of the Soviet Union in line from 1954 to 1991. Lukashenko’s KGB operates just like its predecessor. In tandem with the Russian Federation’s FSB (Federal Security Service), both organizations are dedicated to keeping their respective oligarchs (Lukashenko in Belarus, Vladimir Putin in Russia) in power by any means necessary.

How Alinevich ended up in Americanka is as follows. Harsh repression in response to increasingly confrontational actions on the part of Belarus anarchists⁴ led Alinevich and another comrade to flee the country for Moscow in fall 2010. There they lived underground until 28 November, when four agents of the FSB abducted Alinevich on the street (his comrade escaped). Bundling him into a vehicle, they drove him to the Belarus border (ceremonially pushing his head down during the crossing, a gesture in recognition that kidnapping is an illegal act) where he was handed over to KGB agents and transported to the detention centre for interrogation.



Alinevich describes the techniques deployed by his persecutors to grind down psychological resistance, including sleep deprivation, 19 hour interrogation sessions filled with “threats, flattery, blackmail,” an isolation cell where the lights are never turned off, masked guards yelling orders and insults, repeat strip searches, plus brutalizing routines such as standing naked in stress postures or running up stairs (repeatedly if you falter) with articles from your cell (mattresses, trunks, sheets). Additionally, they were forced to watch hours of “jail TV”—a stream of demoralizing, neurosis-inducing trash showcasing “mysticism, pseudo-history, Chechen fighters, terrorists, politicians, drug addicts, the Jewish plot, the blood sucking dollar,” etc. Letters from outside were filtered by the guards, who, after a week or two, began turning the flow on and off like a tap, creating false perceptions that you had been entirely forgotten (suddenly, no letters for weeks), or abruptly cutting correspondence from people who mattered to you. “Each message I received with a word of support,” Alinevich emphasizes, “was priceless. Those words excited my memory, didn’t allow me to forget who I was, who I am, and didn’t let the punishers mold a blind obedient puppet out of me.”

The first interrogation by a masked KGB agent focusses on the anarchist movement in Belarus, its “financing,” “leaders,” and “international connections.” This ends with a query if anarchists might work “towards a better future” through collaboration, which Alinevich recognizes as a recruitment technique described in *The Informant’s Diary* (by a former KGB informant). Throughout, he parleys with his interrogator by only relating information he had read on the internet, so nothing is revealed.

We learn much about the psychological dimensions of maintaining one’s dignity and sense of self, most importantly, one’s political integrity, by exercising solidarity with others in jail. Additionally, a series ‘friendly’ meetings in the office of Americanka’s KGB governor, who attempts to undermine his resolve to resist by dialoging about the authority’s ‘point of view,’ yields lessons. Alinevich relates how he kept telling himself, “any courtesy from their side is an element of a web, aimed at creating a subconscious trust. They practice ‘adaptation’ by admitting a system of values [. . .] looking at the governor with a half

smile, I repeated in my mind, over and over again: ‘He presses, smother, and humiliates me, and brings pain to those closest to me. He is an enemy. Everything he says is a lie.’” Alinevich imagines grabbing the governor’s throat and slowly suffocating him as his erstwhile tormentor froths at the mouth. “It was the perfect help!” he concludes.



Alinevich provides insight into how anarchism in the Republic of Belarus evolved out of subcultural resistance rooted in a post-Soviet DIY music scene that mixed antifa activism with punk. He also discusses the regime's attempts to indoctrinate people with a sense of patriotism through falsifying historical narratives and the parochial glorification of nationhood. "A community based on freedom and justice is stronger than a society based on filtered history and exaggerated collectivism," he counters. These values, which anarchism embodies, affirms our shared humanity and hence, transcend borders and cultural divides. As Alinevich outlines in his essay on "Self-determination," anarchism seeks to enact "a system of civil self-government based on direct democracy [...] in which emphasis is placed on broad horizontal communication" Thus, "initiative and intentions come from citizens at the local level." Anarchism calls for the communalization of property and "the triumph of humanism, when freedom, peace and happiness will be available to everyone—that is what anarchism is aiming for."



Appropriately, Alinevich closes with a short meditation on “Political Prisoners” written at a time (Winter 2011) when human rights organizations hesitated to recognize incarcerated Belarus anarchists as political prisoners because they’d allegedly engaged in violence (property destruction). Turning the tables, he points out failure to support such rebellion plays into the hands of tyrannical governments (in Belarus, Syria, and elsewhere) whose capacity for violence knows no limit. Lukashenko’s regime was deploying the law to repress all manner of political dissent. Consequently, it was “critically important to recognize as political prisoners all those people who are de facto political prisoners because of the iniquitous courts, all who challenged the government in a fight for truth and justice.”

On the Way to Magadan is a memoir like no other, and the realities it analyses are all the more poignant when we know what lay ahead for its author. In 2015, international pressures forced the authorities to release Alinevich, after which he went into involuntary exile (Poland). In 2020 Belarus erupted in mass protests against Lukashenko’s rule, a situation which inspired Alinevich to undertake a daring intervention. Anarchist Black Cross Belarus reports:

Ihar Alinevich was detained with three other comrades while trying to secretly cross the Ukrainian-Belarusian border on the night of 29 October 2020. He was beaten up by border guards while the police cut off the skin on his feet to extort a statement from him. Together with Dzmitry Rezanovich, Dzmitry Dubouski and Siarhei Ramanau, he was charged under a terrorist article for possessing weapons and setting fire to government officials’ vehicles, the headquarters of the traffic police and the state forensics committee. Ihar received a sentence of 20 years of imprisonment.

After the sentencing he stated:

In the conditions of Belarusian authoritarianism, the revolution was made possible precisely because of decentralisation. I wanted to contribute to the further development of events in a decentralised direction so that the regime would fall under the onslaught of the people’s unity, and not in the course of behind-the-scenes negotiations and concessions.

Thus, the purpose of my participation in the underground struggle was not to intimidate people, influence the authorities, or destabilise an already destabilised society. On the contrary, my aim was to inspire the people so that through courageous actions, they would believe in their own strength. I wanted the liberation of the revolutionary personality, the radicalization of consciousness, so that individuals would overcome the usual patterns of subordination and authoritarian dogmas. I wanted them not to look into the mouths of the leaders but to strive to take the initiative in their own hands, become bolder, more ambitious in their political desires, and self-organise with others.

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You can support Ihar Alinevich by contacting Anarchist Black Cross Belarus: <https://abc-belarus.org/en/2020/10/30/ihar-alinevich/>



Notes

1 “Dani Dugum” inverts the name of a West New Guinean tribe, the Dugum Dani. Vasiliy Pero (1834–1882) was a Russian realist painter known for his depictions of the poor and downtrodden.

2 Named after the Tsar Nicholas II’s (1868–1917) Prime Minister Pytor Stolypin (1862–1911), whose administration shipped millions of peasants to Siberia for resettlement in railway cattle cars.

3 The prison is adjacent to the city of Novopolotsky in northern Belarus.

4 Inspired by the example of insurrectionary anarchism in Greece, Belarus anarchists ‘upped the anti’ beginning in 2008. Among other actions, Alinevich lists an anti-war march during which a smoke grenade was thrown in the vicinity of the army’s General Staff Building; an attack on a police station using flares; and Molotov cocktails tossed at the Russian Embassy in Minsk. We get a recounting of how Belarus authorities went from paying no attention to the ‘above ground’ movement before 2008 to policing punk rock concerts, shutting down a public lecture series on anarchism, and intimidating the staffers of Belarusian Indymedia into denouncing anarchist militancy while anarchists were being subject to raids, arrests, and court trials.