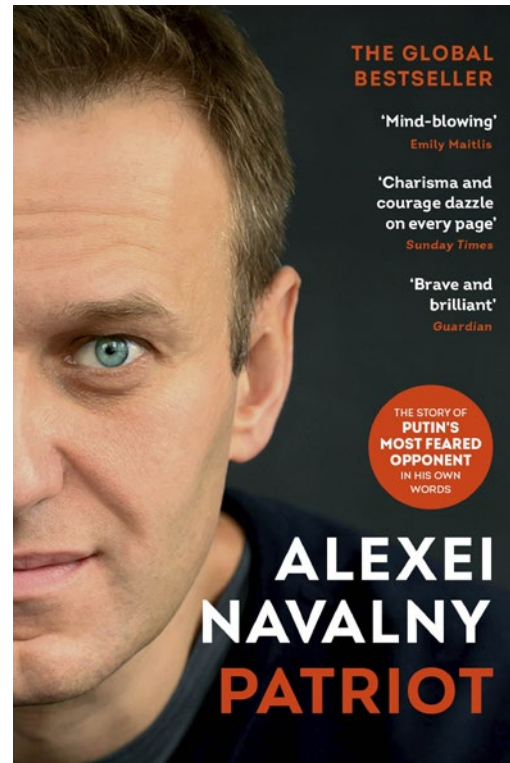


Patriot

By *Alexei Navalny* —

Reviewed by *OLGA YOLDI*



“Dying really didn’t hurt”. This is the first sentence you read in *Patriot*, a memoir written by the jailed Russian opposition leader, Alexei Navalny, who died in a prison colony inside the Arctic Circle while serving a 19-year sentence on a variety of charges, widely regarded as politically motivated. He was 47.

A lawyer as well as a political activist, Navalny was described as being a charismatic, controversial and extraordinarily brave leader. He exposed widespread corruption among Russia’s political elite and broadcast it to millions of Russians via YouTube and other social media platforms, triggering mass protests across the nation. He built networks of activists and in 2011 launched the Anti-Corruption Foundation before authorities forced it to close.

Navalny earned the trust of the Russian people. He was particularly popular with young people dissatisfied with the government. His vision of a free and democratic Russia terrified the regime. But his popularity continued to grow over the years and he became a unifying figure, a symbol of resistance and the most credible alternative to Putin.

“Navalny had a unique ability to speak to the concerns of Russians across the country and to mobilise them to take to the streets,” writes Amy Mackinnon in *Foreign Policy*. “Well-educated and intelligent, Navalny was nevertheless not part of the intelligentsia – a fact which only helped broaden his appeal ... He revealed powerful Russian officials to be corrupt, but

also fallible and therefore mortal.”

His audacity soon made him a target of the regime. The authorities jailed him on multiple charges. But Navalny insisted he was not afraid of the regime. Once he said: “These 15 days spent in prison have strengthened my belief that there is nothing to fear. We are not at all alone, the majority is behind us. We are the majority. They are the ones who are scared and see and feel that.”

On August 20, 2020, during a flight from the Siberian city of Tomsk to Moscow, Navalny was poisoned with the deadly nerve agent, Novichok. He later said he sensed his brain was shutting down and life was draining away. The plane made an emergency landing in Omsk, where he was hospitalised. Two days later – thanks to the persistence of his wife, Yulia Navalnaya, and intense international pressure, the government allowed a German plane to take him to Berlin for treatment. Western intelligence officials called the attack “a state-sponsored assassination attempt”.

When he emerged from a coma 18 days later, he announced he would return to Russia once he had recovered. He returned to Moscow in January 2021, only to be arrested at the airport and sent to prison. He had made it quite clear the safety of exile was not for him: “I have my country and my convictions,” he said in a Facebook note. “I don’t want to give up my country or betray it. If your convictions mean something, you must be prepared to stand up for them and make sacrifices if necessary.”

“His return to Russia in 2021, in the knowledge that he would be imprisoned without hope of release, marked his shift from political activism to the highest form of self-sacrifice,” wrote Russian journalist Maria Lipman in *Foreign Affairs*. “His prison diary, featured in the book, reads like a journey into martyrdom.”

Indeed, his situation worsened dramatically when he was transferred to the “special regime” colony known as Polar Wolf, described as a hellish outpost. *Patriot* is a harrowing account of the appalling conditions of the Russian penitentiary system –the suffering, the freezing temperatures, inadequate food and medical care, long solitary confinements, the boredom, isolation and exhaustion. His prison dispatches are similar to the ones found in Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, a book I read decades ago, which shows the Russian penitentiary system has not changed since the times of the Soviet Union’s gulags.

This memoir also describes his carefree childhood, summers spent in Ukraine at his grandmother’s farm and his university years until 1999, when Putin comes to power and Navalny enters politics. He ponders on the sheer absurdity of prison life, the routines and his constant battle against despair: “I will die here, forgotten by everybody, and be buried in an unmarked grave. My family will be informed that ‘in accordance with the law the burial site cannot be disclosed’. I had difficulty resisting an urge to start furiously smashing everything around me, overturning bunks and bedside tables and yelling, ‘You bastards! You have no right to bury me in an unmarked grave. It’s against the law! It isn’t fair!’ I actually wanted to shout that out.”

He writes about his disappointment with the regime, the endemic corruption and rise of the oligarchs. He reflects on his involvement with anti-corruption investigations and his public life, but also the fall of the Soviet Union, his disappointment with Yeltsin, whom he describes as “a sick old alcoholic with a bunch of cynical fraudsters around him going about their usual business of lining their pockets”.

He reflects on autocracies and their tendency to last a very long time. “The USSR lasted 70 years. The repressive regimes in North Korea and Cuba survive to this day. China, with a whole bunch of political prisoners, has lasted so long that those prisoners grow old and die in prison. The Chinese regime does not relent. It releases no one, despite all the international pressure. The truth of the matter is that we underestimate just how resilient autocracies are in the modern world. With very, very rare exceptions, they are protected from external invasion by UN law, by

the rights of sovereignty,” he writes. “Russia, which right now is waging a classic war of aggression against Ukraine (which has increased tenfold the predictions of the regime’s imminent collapse), is additionally protected by its membership of the UN Security Council and its nuclear weapons.”

As hopes of the collapse of the regime remained unlikely and the chances of him getting out of prison alive diminishes with time, he ponders his uncertain future. He writes about a conversation with wife Yulia in which both come to terms with the fact that he might die in prison. “I will spend the rest of my life in prison and die here. There will not be anybody to say goodbye to. Or, while I am still in prison, people I know outside will die and I won’t be able to say goodbye to them. I will miss graduations from school and college. Tasselled mortarboards will be tossed in the air in my absence. All anniversaries will be celebrated without me. I’ll never see my grandchildren. I won’t be the subject of any family stories. I’ll be missing from all the photos.”

He was preparing for his death by working on what he called his “prison Zen”, preparing for the worst while still maintaining hope. He remained a devoted Christian until the end.

He died on 16 February 2024. The exact circumstances of his death remain a mystery. Tens of thousands attended his funeral in Moscow, a rare show of defiance. His mission to transform Russia into a free democracy where elections were fair, the media was free and crooks went to jail, was not realised.

Journalist Lucian Kim wrote: “Perhaps Navalny’s most lasting legacy will be in the courage he demonstrated in the face of overwhelming odds.” There can be little doubt that *Patriot* will inspire not only generations of Russians who strive for freedom and democracy, but also freedom fighters everywhere.

Yulia oversaw the book’s completion and told the BBC that she would run for president if she ever returned to Russia. In fact, she has been arrested in absentia on charges of involvement with an extremist group. Yet she vows to continue her late husband’s fight. As she said on X: “I dream of as many people as possible reading this book, because it seems to me that everyone will learn something new about Alexei. [Everyone] will laugh and cry a bit. He was so cool: strong and brave, kind and funny. The best. And the dearest.”

For those Russians who loved and admired him, it is hard to come to terms with his loss, but this memoir cannot fail to keep his legacy alive. R