

Patriot

By Alexei Navalny (translated by Arch Tait with Stephen Dalziel)

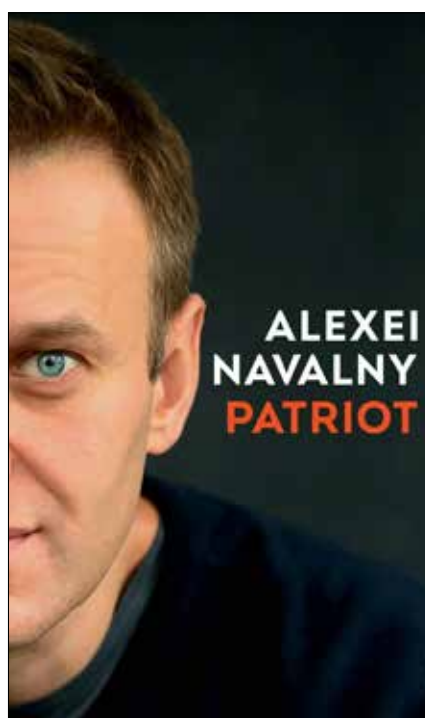
The Bodley Head, 2024, 496 pp, ISBN 978-1847927033, £25.00.

You don't need to have studied homiletics, the art of preaching, to know that sermons frequently deliver three points. I followed a different approach the first time I preached at my local church on the topic of work. Simple is good, I thought, and went with a single point: Work matters! That was a long time ago, but that same single point was constantly in mind as I read Alexei Navalny's memoir.

Navalny was probably the second-best known Russian public figure of the twenty-first century (President Putin presumably holds first position). A lawyer by training, he became a dogged political activist for democracy, the rule of law and transparency, and against corruption and territorial expansion. In August 2020 he was on the campaign trail in Russia when he was poisoned with a military-grade nerve agent, eventually recovering in a Berlin hospital. Determined to continue his work he returned to Russia, was arrested on arrival, and imprisoned until he died.

'Dying really didn't hurt' (p5). A strong start to the book, beginning as it does with his poisoning. 'Formation', the second section of the book, describes his upbringing and the impact that the Chernobyl nuclear disaster had on his family and his thinking. He provides a personal perspective on the collapse of the Soviet Union, offering interesting vignettes of student life during this time of transition. The scene then shifts to 17 January 2021, the day of his final arrest, before returning to his time as a real estate lawyer and the story of how he met his wife Yulia. 'The Work' aptly describes the contents of Part Three, and focuses on the political activism for which he was justly famous. Finally, 'Prison'

chronicles in his own words his experiences after that final arrest.¹ His portrayals of the banality and futility of gulag life are seasoned with his dry sense of humour and refusal to take himself too seriously.²



I wanted to read the book as soon as I heard of it. What could motivate a man to risk his life for a cause? A lost cause, in the view of HARDtalk's Steven Sakhur, who interviewed Navalny eight years ago.³ I had assumed that Navalny was an atheist. He came from a committedly Communist background and told an interviewer 'I had my red tie'.⁴ Mark Greene's review of the book, however, intrigued me when he pointed out Navalny's faith, even comparing him with Jesus who also made a journey to certain death (Luke 9:51).⁵ Was it his Christian beliefs that provide an explanation for the motivation of this remarkable man?

Not much has been published, at least in English, about Navalny's faith.⁶ His autobiography is certainly not punctuated with prayer times, daily Bible reading and church services. When his daughter Dasha gave a TED talk titled 'Lessons from my father' she didn't say anything along the lines of 'Follow Jesus'.⁷ His autobiography provides hints, however; there is a conversion experience, and an explanation as to how he chooses to communicate. There are also two strong statements of belief, and most importantly there is the work itself, and the way he carries it out, described so engagingly in this book.

First, the hints. He speaks of being 'on the side of good' (p.272), in contrast to his opponents who 'shun [truth] as vampires shun sunlight' (p.422). He describes being imprisoned during Lent, when he 'will be going around seriously hungry, and thinking about eternal matters, as you are supposed to' (p.349). He quotes from the Bible to justify his request to the prison authorities for breakfast coffee. He refers to having hope and faith. He reads the Bible, but sometimes because it's the only book available, a situation he describes deadpan as grim. His battle to fight distraction during a prison church service rings true. He assures the reader that he hasn't become a religious fanatic, while telling how he overcame one particular temptation because not to have done so 'would not have been very Christian' (p.414).

Second, the conversion experience. 'Like anyone who grew up in the Soviet Union, I had never believed in God' (p.181). Early in the book he tells us that his grandmother went behind the




Alexei Navalny return
from Germany
January 2021
Photo: Getty Images

back of his atheistic father and had him christened. This didn't stop him, when he was older, from trying to prove to her that God didn't exist. Yet the birth of his daughter had a profound effect upon him. Watching her develop, he came to the realisation that while evolution and biology explained much of what he was seeing, it couldn't explain everything. There was more happening, and he 'gradually became a religious person' (ibid).

Third, he relates the story of one of his trials which took place in the Republic of Buryatia. A long speech he gave in his defence was not well received: 'philosophical and religious considerations don't go down well with the general public' (p.325). His lawyers were of the view that only believers would have been a suitable target audience. He presumably took this advice to heart as he decided how to express himself when writing this book.

Fourth, the statements, one of which is taken from that same speech: "The fact is, I'm religious. . . .I'm a believer now, and I find it helps me a lot in the work I do. Everything becomes just much more straightforward. I spend less time making my mind up and face fewer dilemmas in life because, you see, there is this book and it fairly clearly says what you need to do in any given situation. It's not always easy to do what this book says, but I try" (p.326). The second appears in *Patriot's* conclusion: "are you a disciple of the religion whose founder sacrificed himself for others, paying the price for their sins? Do you believe in the immortality of the soul and the rest of that cool stuff? If you can honestly answer yes, what is there left for you to worry about? Don't worry about the morrow, because the morrow is perfectly capable of taking care of itself. My job is to seek the Kingdom of

God and his righteousness, and leave it to good old Jesus and the rest of his family to deal with everything else" (pp.478-479).

Fifth, and most importantly, I would suggest, is the matter of the work itself. This is a story told by a man whose work mattered more to him than life itself. It's the story of a man who knew what he was supposed to do, and was crystal-clear as to why he should do it. 'If your convictions mean something, you must be prepared to stand up for them and make sacrifices if necessary. And if you're not prepared to do that, you have no convictions' (p.470). His daughter Dasha, speaking before his death, said that she couldn't understand how her father could be so optimistic about the future.⁸ This memoir tells us why. As a Christian, he had hope. And his work mattered. So should we, and so should ours. 

1. For a taste of Navalny's writing at this stage of his life, listen to Benedict Cumberbatch read one of the final letters that he wrote: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=25qEVGqPwLk>
2. There is a haunting video of him, taken the day before he died, where his joking with the court officials who are trying him brings smiles even to their faces: (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pUwOYeei5MU>).
3. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1u6XTUvaDBM>
4. A way of saying that he was a member of the Young Pioneers, a Communist youth organisation.
5. <https://licc.org.uk/resources/for-russia-with-love-navalny-vs-putin-and-the-way-of-the-cross/>
6. See Craig G. Bartholomew's review of John Sweeney's *Murder in the Gulag*, which apparently makes little mention of Navalny's beliefs: <https://kirbylaingcentre.co.uk/sweeney-navalny/>
7. https://www.ted.com/talks/dasha-navalnaya_lessons_from_my_father_alexey_navalny?subtitle=en (There is a hint, however, when she describes what motivated her family: 'If we don't stand up for them now, then who will be left to stand up for us later', a view famously held by Martin Niemöller, who spent seven years in concentration camps).
8. https://www.ted.com/talks/dasha-navalnaya_lessons_from_my_father_alexey_navalny?subtitle=en



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