Francishak Alakhnovich

In the Clutches of the GPU

У капцюрох ГПУ

Presented by: Vital Voranau

Before he leaves Vilnius for Soviet Belarus in 1926, the man at the centre of *In the Clutches of the GPU* tells his young son about a wonderful country called the Soviet Union in place of a fairy tale. He has heard that Belarusian cultural life is flourishing across the border. For a playwright who wants to work in Belarusian and wonders whether people there still remember him, the promise is hard to resist. He plans to see Minsk for himself and perhaps move there with his family. The fairy tale he tells his son is one he still believes himself.

The 1921 Treaty of Riga divided the Belarusian lands. The western territories became part of Poland, and Vilnius, where Alakhnovich lived, was then a centre of Belarusian cultural and political life within Poland. Belarusian activists there faced arrests and restrictions on schooling in their language. They had no Belarusian state institutions of their own. Across the border, Minsk was the capital of the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic, a constituent republic of the Soviet Union. Its territory was enlarged in 1924 and again in 1926. Under Belarusianisation, officially launched in 1924, Belarusian gained ground in schools and public institutions. For a playwright in Vilnius, Minsk offered a chance to help build a Belarusian theatre in a republic that bore the country's name.

Alakhnovich was arrested in early 1927. By the end of the decade, the Soviet authorities had begun to turn against the very people who had helped build Belarusian institutions. In 1930, arrests swept through the Belarusian intelligentsia as the political police pursued an alleged nationalist conspiracy. The opportunities that had drawn people to Minsk were real. Alakhnovich's story shows how they could become a trap when the authorities came to treat commitment to Belarusian culture as grounds for suspicion.

The man is first introduced as the *Poputchik*, or "fellow traveller," a term used at the time for people who sympathized with some of the Bolsheviks' aims without joining the Communist Party. What draws him to Soviet Belarus is the chance to help build a Belarusian theatre. The warm reception in Minsk persuades him that he is wanted. At Canteen No. 1, a former restaurant, he meets a man who takes him to a building where GPU officers live. There they welcome him over vodka. He takes Soviet citizenship. Soon afterwards, the authorities arrest him and sentence him to ten years in the camps. The police question him about his involvement in the Provisional Belarusian Council in Vilnius, then part of Poland. In his account, the charge concerns involvement with an organisation accused of aiding the international bourgeoisie.

Alakhnovich spent nearly seven years in Soviet custody, much of that time in the Solovki camp system in the far north. Solovki even has a theatre, where prisoners put on plays. When typhus spreads through the camp, the theatre closes and fills with beds for the sick. At the height of the epidemic, a hospital orderly starts writing the names of the dead directly on their bodies. The forest

also keeps returning in the book. Near Minsk, it is where prisoners are taken to be shot. In Karelia, prisoners are made to fell trees. Among those same trees a prisoner can sometimes find a moment alone.

In one of the book's most revealing scenes, the camp commandant chooses presentable prisoners for a film. An orchestra plays while prisoners sit in a garden, playing chess and reading magazines. Later Alakhnovich sees himself and his fellow prisoners on screen, apparently happy to work. His mother sees the film too. She writes from Minsk that she is relieved to see that life on Solovki is better than she had feared. He replies that he is doing well. He knows the censor would stop a letter that told her otherwise. The state can stage what a mother sees and decide what her son is allowed to tell her.

The literary scholar Andriej Moskwin calls the book a documentary novel. He traces four versions that Alakhnovich prepared in Belarusian and Polish. In revising the book, Alakhnovich adds scenes from before his arrest and gives his earlier self a name that already carries a political judgment. At first we follow a man who still believes he has choices. As the account moves into the prisons and camps, we hear directly from the survivor. That shift lets us see how the promises of Belarusian cultural life drew him across the border and how the police later used his past against him.

Alakhnovich returned to Vilnius in 1933 in a prisoner exchange for Branislau Tarashkevich, the Belarusian linguist and former member of the Polish parliament. One man was coming back from the Soviet Union as the other crossed into it. Tarashkevich was later arrested and executed there. Alakhnovich began writing soon after his return. Excerpts from his account appeared in the Vilnius newspaper Słowo in 1934. The first Polish book edition followed in 1935. A Russian version appeared in the Paris émigré press, and Ukrainian, Portuguese and Italian editions followed before the Second World War. The first Belarusian book edition appeared in Vilnius in 1937. Alakhnovich had regained his freedom through the exchange, but in 1944 he was shot dead in German-occupied Vilnius. His death and Tarashkevich's execution point to the dangers Belarusian writers and intellectuals faced on both sides of the former Polish–Soviet border.

Prison and camp writing forms a substantial body of Belarusian literature. Many Belarusian writers experienced imprisonment, deportation or forced labour and later wrote about what they had lived through. Their accounts include the poet Larysa Hieniusz's *Споведзь* (*Confession*), the priest Jazep Hermanovich's *Кітай — Сібір — Масква* (*China — Siberia — Moscow*), Siarhei Hrakhouski's *Зона маўчання* (*Zone of Silence*) and Jan Skryhan's *Горкая далячынь*(*Bitter Distance*). Read alongside these works, Alakhnovich's book shows how much of the history of Soviet repression survives in Belarusian first-person writing.

In the Clutches of the GPU was among the earliest published eyewitness accounts of Soviet camp life. By the time Gustaw Herling-Grudziński's *A World Apart* appeared in English in 1951, Alakhnovich's first book edition had been in print for sixteen years. It also preceded Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* by more than a quarter of a century. The book reached readers in several languages before the war and remains less widely known internationally than those later works. A timely English translation might have given it a much wider readership. Its Belarusian perspective is part of what that readership missed. To date, no full English translation has been identified.

LANGUAGE: Polish/Polski, Belarusian/ беларуская

CENSORSHIP STATUS: