

# Alexei Navalny and the Long Tradition of Moral Defiance Against Tyranny in Russia

Igor Torbakov

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When the news of Alexei Navalny's death in Russia's Arctic gulag spread around the world, the avalanche of commentary ensued in which the most prominent opposition leader and the fiercest critic of president Vladimir Putin was mourned as Russia's most daring, sophisticated and Western-looking politician. Yet Navalny's political struggle with tyranny that ended in a polar penal colony in what looks like a state-sponsored murder makes his "life and fate" very Russian – a part of the long historical tradition of moral defiance against a cruel and deceitful autocrat.

Navalny himself did not like to be called a dissident. Very early on in his public career, Navalny styled himself as a professional politician – one who leads a political movement or party, participates in debates, wins elections, takes public office, and carries out his political program. He openly declared that he was going to vie for top position – that of the president of the Russian Federation. Navalny was well endowed to pursue this goal: he was charismatic, intelligent, handsome, telegenic, and had a good sense of humor. As a political operator, he was also very modern and "un-Russian" in a sense that he was extremely media-savvy: he instantly grasped the power of internet and social networks for spreading his message. Navalny was an exceptionally talented organizer and manager: he was successful in building a powerful political machine in the form of the Foundation for the Fight against Corruption and its regional chapters across Russia's vast expanse. These capabilities made Navalny a unique figure among Russia's opposition leaders: over the last decade or so, he was the only one who could bring huge numbers of protesters on to the streets in support of his political agenda.

In any democratic country, Navalny would be a great success as a politician. But Putin's Russia is not a democracy: over the past several years it evolved from a corrupt authoritarian state into a thuggish and brutal dictatorship. One cannot pursue a political career in present-day Russia: you can either be the Kremlin dictator's loyal servitor or part of the ever silent narod (common people). Any sign of disloyalty or opposition is suppressed. Navalny was aware of this better than anyone else: back in 2020, he was poisoned with a nerve agent

by Putin's secret police goons. Yet he returned to Moscow from Germany after a life-saving treatment, knowing full well that he would be immediately arrested and thrown behind bars.

How to explain this seemingly irrational move? It is at this fateful moment that Alexei Navalny's Russian story truly begins. This story has to do with the history of Russian intelligentsia, Russian literature, the traditions of political dissent and of truth-telling, and the quasi-religious quest for a virtuous life.

In a comment on Navalny's tragic death, the Russian writer Dmitry Glukhovsky astutely noted that over the last several years, Navalny the real man of flesh and blood, warts and all, full of all sorts of contradictions, has turned -- due to his deeds, courage, and moral choices -- into an "irreproachable hero of a religious myth." A life he had lead over the last years, Glukhovsky added, was "the life of a saint; his death [was] the death of a martyr."

One of the key features of Russian intelligentsia -- a specific social group that emerged in the 1830s-40s -- was a constant quest for moral ideals. This strong desire for moral perfection was born out of the confluence of the two intellectual traditions: one religious, stemming from Eastern (Byzantine) Christianity; the other secular -- a legacy of the Enlightenment moralism. At the heart of Russian intelligentsia's ethos is the notion of *sovest'* (conscience). To have "clear conscience," to live unflinchingly according to the precepts of conscience and truth has long been one of intelligentsia's deep-rooted social ideals.

Historically, Russian intelligentsia arose in conditions of confrontation with the Tsarist autocracy. One can say that the opposition to Tsarism as a bureaucratic institution has shaped Russian intelligentsia with its rules of right conduct and beliefs about what is right or wrong. As the outstanding Russian cultural historian Boris Uspensky put it, "It is precisely the intelligentsia--Tsar dichotomy that lies at the origins of Russian intelligentsia." Intelligent is always in opposition. He is the one who constantly contrasts his moral values with the bureaucratic ethos of Russian repressive state system.

As a specific social group, intelligentsia has left historical scene with the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, its moral principles did not disappear together with it: they were interiorized by a large number of Russian people through the reading of the works of classical Russian literature, which in its turn had been the product of Russian intelligentsia's creative effort. Not unlike the Old (medieval) Russian literature, which was thoroughly religious in its nature, the greatest Russian 19th- and early 20th-century novels performed a didactic function: they sought to teach how to live a life of dignity, discussed the never-ending struggle between Good and Evil and warned about the constant need to make a choice between Truth and Falsehood. In many memoirs and interviews, the prominent members of Soviet dissident movement confirmed that their own moral principles as well as their negative attitude towards the "immoral" Soviet system had been shaped by the subversive "quasi-religious" essence of Russian literature.

Alexei Navalny, born in 1976, belonged to a new Russian generation: he was a teenager when Communism fell and the Soviet Union disintegrated. Yet the factors that formed his moral outlook appear to be the same as those that were at work during the previous decades. Russian literature seemed to have played an important role. In a remarkable letter he sent not long before his death to the prominent Russian opposition journalist Sergei Parkhomenko, Navalny discussed some Russian classics, in particular Chekhov's stories, and compared the dark realism of some pieces with Dostoevsky's oeuvre. The letter ended with a telling

exhortation: “One has to read [Russian] classics. We don’t know them [well enough].” It is also difficult not to see the direct parallel between Navalny’s passionate desire for truth and the Russian literary and dissident tradition of truth-telling that was best epitomized by Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s 1974 essay *Live Not by Lies*. All Navalny streams invariably ended with a phrase: “Subscribe to our channel: here we tell the truth.”

Alexei Navalny’s moral rectitude, personal courage, and fearless determination to stand by his principles no matter what put him on a par with a long row of Russian victims of political repression who defied Russian Leviathan over the last two centuries. The fragmented Russian opposition now has a powerful hero myth and symbol to rally around. Putin (or bunker grandpa, as Navalny used to mockingly call him) was afraid of his most prominent political opponent when he was alive. Now when Navalny is dead, Putin arguably finds himself in a worse situation. The Kremlin tyrant should be reminded of Søren Kierkegaard’s famous maxim: “The tyrant dies and his rule is over; the martyr dies and his rule begins.”



**Igor Torbakov**

Senior Fellow at the Institute for Russian and Eurasian Studies at Uppsala University.

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