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My Leftist Foot

The story of a boy with cerebral palsy who escaped the Soviets' gulag for handicapped children.

Reviewed by Rebecca Reich
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WHITE ON BLACK

By Ruben Gallego

Translated from the Russian by Marian Schwartz

Harcourt. 168 pp. \$22

In the Soviet Union, according to its 1936 Constitution, unemployment did not officially exist: "Work is a duty and a matter of honor for every able-bodied citizen according to the principle, 'He who does not work shall not eat.'" The new Soviet man was to be broad of chest and square of jaw, tireless in his dedication to the country's welfare. Set him a work quota, and he'd double it. Double his quota, and he'd flex his muscles and double it again.

Ruben Gallego could use only two of his fingers. Born in 1968 with cerebral palsy and abandoned to the Soviet orphanage system, he got around, for lack of a wheelchair, by pulling himself along the floor, as does the main character bearing his name in the jarring opening vignette of *White on Black*. "I was a better student than anyone," the narrator makes a point of mentioning. Unfortunately, his brainpower doesn't mean much to the caretakers who carry him to the toilet. "You say he's smart," one of them observes, "but he can't walk!"

White on Black captures a grim side of the Soviet workers' paradise: the thousands of children classified as physically or mentally disabled and locked away from public view. Winner of the 2003 Russian Booker Prize for best novel, this semi-fictionalized memoir now appears in Marian Schwartz's faithful translation. "My heroes are collective images from the endless kaleidoscope of my endless children's homes," Gallego asserts at the start. "What I write, though, is the truth." Paradoxically, under communism, truth was a realm unofficially ceded to writers of fiction, since facts were so often hedged or bent by politics. In *White on Black*, fiction similarly provides a truth-telling veneer to Gallego's straightforward if sometimes too convenient arrangement of facts -- a way of getting at the essential reality.

That reality is one that few others could describe firsthand. The grandson of a leader of the Spanish Communist Party, Gallego was shut away in the Soviet orphanage system at the age of 1 for a variety of complicated reasons having to do with his grandfather's political career. His mother, then a student in

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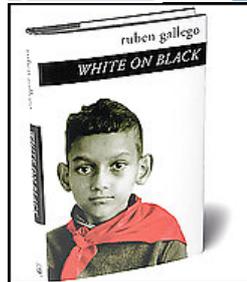
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Moscow, was told her sickly son had died. Gallego spent his youth moving through a blur of children's and old-age homes. It was only thanks to *perestroika* that he managed to break free, marry twice, father two children and eventually, after discovering the truth about his origins, reunite with his mother in the West.

The mini-tales that make up *White on Black*, which Gallego typed with his left index finger, brutally expose the reality the Soviet government did not want its people to see -- a reality that persists despite some improvements, with hundreds of thousands of orphaned or abandoned children living under circumstances that Human Rights Watch, in 1998, called "shocking" for their "levels of cruelty and neglect."

Escaping -- indeed, surviving -- the closed institutions in which Gallego grew up often depended on the slim likelihood of mastering a practical trade. Food, heat and kind words were pitifully rare, and public humiliation was a common disciplinary tactic. "Poor child, better you'd died," one caretaker says. "You'd have spared yourself the suffering, and us." Yet even such callousness was less painful, on balance, than tales of a brave new world meant for everyone but him: "They told stories about the stars and continents, but they wouldn't let me go past the gate of the children's home."

Physical disability was positively portrayed in official rhetoric only when overcome, raised to the level of national myth in the case of Pavel Korchagin, the hero of Nikolai Ostrovsky's autobiographical novel *How the Steel Was Tempered*, who exchanges his gun for a pen after blindness and paralysis strike. When Korchagin loses his right eye, he declares: "Better to go blind in the left one; how will I shoot now?" Looking to Ostrovsky and Korchagin as models, Gallego devotes some of the more powerful sketches to his narrator's attempts to eat as little as possible, thereby making it easier for his caretakers to carry him around.

Generally, though, the dogma seems lost on him. In the most piercing and starkly ironic incident, the narrator recalls falling in love with the idea of America after being told that the capitalists there routinely have their handicapped children killed. "I want the injection, the fatal injection," he says passionately. "I want to go to America." To him, the Soviet myth is little more than a hollow and oppressive pretense of compassion. Gallego unmasks that charade with intelligence and authority, exposing along with it any cult of heroism that thrives on suppressing human weakness. "I'm a hero," he states. "If you don't have hands or feet, you're either a hero or dead." *White on Black* demonstrates in no uncertain terms that this hero is alive and kicking.

Rebecca Reich is the books editor of the Moscow Times and a writer at Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism.

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