

Alpine Ballad

Vasil Bykau

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Translated by Mikalai Khilo



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by Vasil Bykau

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Glagoslav Publications Ltd
88-90 Hatton Garden
EC1N 8PN London
United Kingdom

www.glagoslav.com

ISBN: 978-1-78437-944-5

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Introduction

Vasil Bykau (1924-2003)

Vasil Bykau was undoubtedly the most significant Belarusian prose writer of the 20th century, who earned a wide international reputation through translations of his works into Russian, English and other languages. In 1980 he became a People's Writer of Belarus, despite having had his works considerably censored in the preceding decade. It was, however, a great disappointment to his friends in Belarus and abroad that he was not awarded the Nobel prize for literature in 2001, despite the support of such luminaries as Joseph Brodsky, Czesław Miłosz (both themselves laureates) and the distinguished writer and politician Václav Havel. It may be added that Bykau himself, a modest man, seemed least concerned by this event. The fact that in 1978 he was elected a People's Deputy of the BSSR, and in 1989 a People's Deputy of the USSR, witnesses to the high esteem in which he was held; nothing, however, was as powerful as an open letter in 1988 from the students of Navapolatsk (Novopolotsk) who described him as 'the conscience of the Belarusian nation'.

Born into a peasant family in the Vitsyebsk (Vitebsk) region of north-east Belarus, after his schooldays he studied sculpture at the celebrated Vitsyebsk Art School, whose distinguished alumni included Marc Chagall and Chaim Soutine, but was unable to continue for financial

reasons. During World War II he served in an engineering battalion and from 1943 held the rank of a junior officer, and was twice wounded. It is precisely from the point of view of morally strong junior officers that most of his works are written. Recalled to the army after the war, Bykau began writing stories in 1951, and his first notable work was *Zhurauliny kryk*, (*The Cry of the Crane*, 1959) which is set in 1941 and depicts a small group of soldiers faced by a virtually impossible mission. Much of the novel's point of view is that of a young boy experiencing war for the first time. Already Bykau's concern with psychology and the behaviour of people in life-threatening situations is evident. In later works the themes of treachery (often by Stalinist officers) and the traces of the ruthless and cynical past in present-day Belarus also become prominent in his prose. Indeed, most of Bykau's intensely realistic work is based on his own experiences of the war, and has little in common with most heroic, panoramic Soviet war literature. Instead, many of his works analyse the wartime choices and tough moral decisions of young officers dealing with existential crises usually in tight spaces and over short intense periods; the decisions demanded are based on humanity and realism, often in contrast to the immoral behaviour of cynical commanding officers as well as to cowardice and treachery in all ranks.

After an illustrious career as a highly respected Soviet writer, some of whose works were too outspoken to be published in his own country, Bykau emigrated in 1998, four years after the accession of Belarus's current authoritarian ruler, first to Helsinki, then Frankfurt, and finally to Prague, returning to Minsk shortly before his death in 2003. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and particularly during his period of exile Bykau extended considerably the thematic

range of his works, whilst retaining his strong interest in the Stalinist past and its present-day heritage of harshness and immorality. His prose written abroad became even more outspoken, and some of his later works took the symbolic rather than realistic form of parables, which illustrated obliquely his frequently bleak view of Belarus and Belarusians, although his concern for his countrymen's weakness and mistakes never obscures his deep love for his native land, evident throughout his works.

Before turning to *Alpine Ballad* (originally *Al'piyskaya balada*), it is worth mentioning three outstanding works already published in English translation: the first, *Sotnikau*, 1970 (*The Ordeal*, 1972), is a powerful depiction of bravery and cowardice, but without overt moral judgment, in which Bykau cleverly shows the strong temptation of self-preservation as well as the difficulty of living morally under Stalin. Narrated by each of the two partisans on a particularly difficult assignment in occupied Belarus, the ordeal is extreme and the mission doomed from the start, despite their being sheltered by some peasants, one of whom is the village headman, allowing further discussion of how to behave under an occupation as cruel as pre-war peacetime had been. The double point of view of the narration enables Bykau to achieve the high level of objectivity for which he was famous.

Another prominent novel, probably the most autobiographical of Bykau's works, *Miortvym nie balits'* (*The Dead Feel No Pain*) first appeared in a journal in 1964, but was subsequently banned for seventeen years, and only in 2009 appeared in full uncensored form, although it had been published abroad far earlier; its English translation came out in 2010. Bykau was persecuted by the highest

political and literary authorities as well as the KGB for daring to write about individuals rather than epic struggles. The story is of a young officer who, detailed to escort some German prisoners in 1944, is severely punished because they escape, entirely through circumstances beyond his control. His disgust after the war at seeming to find one of his tormentors enjoying post-war life underlines not only the rigidity of Soviet views on World War II, but the longevity of Stalinist ideas and behaviour.

Finally should be mentioned a novel thought by many to be Bykau's best, *Znak biady*, 1982 (The Sign of Misfortune, 1990). In this work, set at the beginning of the war, there are no Soviet soldiers or partisans, only intermittently brutal occupying German soldiers and their willing Belarusian collaborators the *Politsai*. On a desolate farmstead an old couple face a particularly bleak future; the old man feels that only an accommodating attitude can save them, whilst his wife remains determined to take revenge. Particularly interesting are the extended flashbacks to the fanatical and ruthless dispossession of the kulaks (rich peasants) at the end of the 1920s witnessed by the old woman in her youth, for it is the bitter children of the dispossessed peasants who naturally join the Germans' local helpers. Any of the three novels mentioned above may be recommended to readers enthused by the novel now presented to the public.

Alpine Ballad, first published in 1964, is in some respects untypical of Bykau's writing, having elements of lyricism and intimate feelings not found elsewhere in his work. It is moreover not set in Belarus but in a foreign land, with finely detailed nature descriptions, and contains far more dialogue than this writer's characteristic terse exchanges and interior monologues. Following its appearance in Russian

(Bykau always translated his own works from Belarusian into Russian), the novel became popular and was soon turned into a film; the Russian version, incidentally, was considerably censored, and Bykau's original text modified, for instance, by watering down Ivan's criticism of the collective farms to Giulia, his naive Italian friend, as well as completely removing parallels between the Fascist and Soviet systems. Ivan frequently attempts to disabuse his companion of her idealised pre-conceptions, preferring honesty to beautiful lies and clearly remembering Stalin's appalling purges in the years leading up to the war, but towards the end of the book he recants and praises his homeland in order to console Giulia. The publication of Russian versions of Bykau's works often gave the censors, always suspicious of this uncompromising and relentlessly honest writer (of all the major writers of his generation Bykau never joined the Communist party), a second chance to change and remove anything that did not follow the Soviet version of the Great Patriotic War, their name for World War II (which for them, following the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, lasted from 1941 to 1945).

Although *Alpine Ballad* is more romantic than most of Bykau's works, his qualities of taut realistic narration, honesty of principles and a strong sense of Belarusian patriotism are also evident here. In this, the only one of his works to give a major role to a foreigner, moral and other questions are mostly raised through dialogue rather than reflected in internal monologues. Ivan is almost the only character in Bykau's works to feel intimate emotions; also notable are the writer's experiments with a rather comic, though ostensibly realistic depiction of Giulia's speech. Bykau was known to his friends as a mild, modest man with

a good sense of humour, although his prose is generally too severe and taut to allow any levity. *Alpine Ballad* was a new departure, allowing him, through the words of a foreign Communist, to show an idealized and completely unrealistic picture of the Soviet Union; it was Ivan's modest, though not unpatriotic, attempts to modify the Italian's extremely optimistic views that, amongst other things, fell foul of the censor.

This new translation of *Alpine Ballad* into English provides a welcome introduction to an early work of a major Belarusian writer acclaimed throughout the Slavic lands and beyond.

Arnold McMillin

1.

He stumbled over something, fell and immediately jumped back to his feet, feeling that he had better get away from this place, from the dead *Kommandoführer*^{*}, before the alarm was raised. He had to hole up somewhere, hide and maybe even fight his way out of the factory. However, almost nothing could be seen in the swirling clouds of dust that had filled the workshop, and he nearly stepped into the black crater created by the bomb. He ran around the hole to avoid any snags in the dust, stretched out one hand, gripping his pistol with the other, rolled over a huge concrete slab that must have been ripped from the ground and hit something painfully with his shin. He immediately regretted the loss of his clogs when he jumped up barefoot and his skin began to burn on the crushed stone littering the ground.

Meanwhile, someone screamed behind him, and submachine gun fire rang out at the other end of the workshop. *Like hell*, he said to himself as he lightly jumped over an iron girder from the ruined ceiling and ran onto a precariously tilted partition. Although the dust from the explosion was slowly settling and clearing, it still provided good cover. He climbed to the very top of the partition and finally got a view of his surroundings. A gust of wind

* *Kommandoführer* – SS work detail commander in a concentration camp

rushed over him and quickly drove away the dust. Using his arms for balance on his concrete perch, he reached the edge of the damaged area. The pockmarked wall of the outer fence was about three steps ahead, and beyond it, nestled in vegetation and quiet, without a care in the world, stood several houses, with a green forest just up the slope and the Alps—his hope, his life or death, his destiny—a stone's throw away. Taking a quick look around, Ivan stuck the butt of his pistol in his teeth and jumped. He gripped two of the sharp iron spikes that topped the fence and, without stopping, flung his body over to the other side. Ivan did not jump immediately. Instead, he lowered his feet to soften the fall and then let go. He landed among weeds, grabbed the pistol with his hand and ran all out across the potato field along the tall wire fence.

People were shooting and shouting behind his back, and Alsatian dogs were barking somewhere in the distance. This was the worst-case scenario, but he had no time to think or change anything. Several bullets whined high over his head, and he felt that they had not been fired at him, that he had not yet been spotted. Tearing his bare toes, he climbed over the fence mesh and ran even faster along a slag path leading ever higher towards the nearby suburb.

The workshop blast had caused a stir in the town. Two boys were running as fast as they could toward the factory from some white house. Luckily, they did not notice him, and Ivan pressed on. All of a sudden, a girl in a floral skirt carrying a watering can stepped almost directly into his path from behind acacia shrubs. Her eyes widened with terror. She screamed and dropped the watering can onto the path with a clang. He rushed past her in silence and found himself on a wider street on the outskirts. Looking

up and down the street and seeing no one, Ivan ran across it, scrambled through some thorny growth, and then fell. There were no more houses ahead, just a quiet unmown meadow on the hillside, with daisies dozing in its windless silence and wisps of grass gently swaying. The more distant gullies and ravines were covered with woods. The towering grey masses of the Alps in the hot June sky overlooked the landscape.

Stifling his violent gasps, Ivan stopped to listen. People were screaming and shooting behind him, the Alsatians were barking more loudly, but the sounds were coming from the factory, and no one seemed to be chasing after him. He ran the sleeve of his striped coat over his face to wipe streams of sweat from his brow, rose slightly, looking for a way across the meadow, and noticed a gully that came particularly close to the town. Fir trees, sparse at the edge of the woods, stretched over the steep slope down towards the gully. At this sight, he jumped back to his feet.

With his legs extremely unresponsive and slack, and his body growing heavier, the movement proved very difficult. Halfway up the slope he looked back again. The barking was getting closer, gunfire erupted nearby, but he did not hear any bullets—he was clearly not the target. Others were under fire. The pursuers were probably scattering. This made things easier for him, and he thought about the lads for the first time. And for the first time, his heart throbbed painfully. There were probably no survivors—everybody else must have paid with their lives for his freedom.

He was trudging uphill, wearied. The whole Austrian town was now in plain view behind his back. Its nearby half was covered with long hulking factory structures that resembled hangars and were dotted with gaping holes and

bombed-out ruins. One section of the long fence was ruined, and twisted ceiling girders protruded next to it at the end of a building. The place was crawling with people. He hunched in the grass—a kneeling person could already hide behind the hill—and ran down towards the stream for several minutes. Screened by the hill, he finally straightened out. A wooded slope lay before him.

Ivan wiped his face with his sleeves and stopped running. Now he would make his way along the grassy gully. The terrain grew even steeper. Near him a stream was churning noisily among slippery stones. Ivan walked briskly until he reached the sparse fir trees. And then the barking behind him grew much louder. The dogs seemed to be very close, right behind the hill, and he resumed his exhausting uphill run. He only wished he could somehow get to the forest, to the dense fir trees, where it was easier to hide, trick the pursuers, or, if his freedom was forever lost, make his death count.

However, Ivan never made it to the forest.

He was climbing the grassy slope, strewn all over with scree, past large and small fragments of rock, and had almost reached the edge of a pine tree forest when dogs shot from behind the hill and burst into loud and furious barking. He dashed sideways to a small fir tree, bent slightly, and looked through the branches. Racing along his tracks over the hill, flashing its brown back in the grass, was an Alsatian dog. Another Alsatian was barking hoarsely somewhere behind it. But the Germans were nowhere to be seen.

Ivan looked around and, realising that the thicket was too far away, moved his feet wider apart and tightened his grip on the pistol. Despite knowing that his survival depended on ammunition, he had no idea how many

rounds his magazine held and no time to count them. He relaxed his muscles for a moment and tried to breathe more evenly. He had to calm down, pull himself together, and slow his heartbeat so as not to miss.

Meanwhile, the dog spotted him. Its barking grew more intense and vicious as it flew uphill, its paws pressed together, panting and wheezing. Ivan stooped behind the fir tree and pointed his pistol towards a sharp piece of grass-covered rock, judging that it was about fifty steps away.

The Alsatian was advancing in huge bounds, ears flat against its head, tail straight. He could now see its gaping mouth and its lolling tongue flanked by yellow canines. Ivan held his breath, trying to take aim as best he could, and fired just before the dog had reached the rock. He immediately realised that the shot had gone wide. The barrel of his pistol jerked upward, the smell of gunpowder filled the air, and the Alsatian squealed with even more excitement. Hastily, and almost without aiming, he fired again, physically certain of the direction of the vicious attack.

And then he felt a glimmer of joy in his heart as the dog yelped, jumped wildly, flipped over, and crashed some twenty steps away, its body going into convulsions and spasms on the grass. He was about to dive into the woods when he saw one more dog. The huge animal with spots on its sides was powering uphill, stretching out its legs, breathing heavily. A long strap leash was dragging and bouncing behind it through the grass.

Alas, Ivan did not notice the danger on time. He swung the pistol in its direction but never got a shot—the gun had probably jammed. He yanked his weapon back and slapped its bolt with his palm, but he was already within the reach of the hound, which gave a throaty growl and pounced. Ivan

bent over and ducked behind a fir tree. The dog flew just above his shoulder, rolled over heavily and lunged at him, its jaws agape. Ivan threw up his arms, not knowing how to defend himself.

So powerful was the momentum of the jump that it swept Ivan off his feet, knocked the pistol from his hand and sent them both, the human and the animal, rolling on the ground. It looked like everything would soon be over, but Ivan managed at the last moment to grab the hound by the collar and push it back, making an almost superhuman effort to keep its teeth away. There was the sound of tearing cloth as the dog ripped at him with its claws. Holding the Alsatian's collar as tightly as he could, Ivan reached out with his left hand, grabbed the dog by a front leg and flung it over. They rolled over each other twice, and he ended up right beside the dog. Ivan spread out his legs and tried to straddle the animal, but it was coughing, wheezing, and clawing at him so furiously that he knew he would not last long. Gathering all his dexterity for the final, decisive attack, he spun on the ground, caught hold of the dog, threw it over his shoulder and fell on top, driving his knee as hard as he could into its ribs. The dog jerked, almost tearing the collar out of his hand, and yelped. Ivan felt something crack under his knee. The dog let out a piercing shriek, and the human pulled the collar tighter with raw fingers and pressed harder with his knee. However, the hound squealed, threw up its rear, pulled violently, and broke free.

With some brutal hardness in his heart, Ivan tensed in anticipation of another jump. However, the dog sprawled on the ground and lay there with its thick snout pointing forward, tongue hanging out. Its breath was rapid and tired as it watched the human with wild eyes. Ivan's right hand,

the one that had held the collar, was on fire, a muscle in his forearm was twitching spasmodically from exertion, and his heart seemed about to jump out of his chest. For a few seconds, he also stood on his knees and shaky hands in the grass and stared at the dog as if he were some savage beast.

The human and the dog eyed each other wildly, wary that the adversary would pounce first. Ivan was also very fearful that the Germans would appear at any moment, and those few seconds felt to him like eternity. He finally decided that the hound was unlikely to attack and cautiously rose to his feet. Never taking his fixed gaze off the dog, he jumped away and grabbed a stone from the grass. The hound arched its back and lashed the ground with its tail, but stopped short of a jump. The animal was probably no better off than the human, and all it could manage was a helpless whimper. When Ivan took a more decisive step backwards, the hound rose slightly and started forward, its leash moving in the grass. However, it did not run or pounce. This made Ivan even bolder, and he quickly moved up the slope, taking sideways steps toward the fir tree where his pistol lay.

The dog whined in helpless rage as it dragged its crippled hindquarters through the grass, crawled forward weakly, and stopped. Meanwhile, the human snatched the Browning from the ground and started uphill along the gully, trying to make the best of his remaining energy to get to the fir trees.

2.

Five or so minutes later, he was already in the woods and running along the turbulent, clear stream. The forest floor was free of dead branches and trunks, but the numerous rock fragments littering the ground were getting in the way. Moreover, the terrain was getting steeper and the climb was rapidly draining his energy. Expecting and fearing a new pursuit, Ivan jumped into the stream at one point to hide his tracks from the Alsatians. The water sent a punch of icy coldness through his feet, burning his soles and forcing him back to the bank after some twenty steps. He climbed the rocky slope, pulled the bolt to reload the pistol, stooped to pick up a bent cartridge that had dropped on the stones, and suddenly froze. The babble of the brook behind him was now mixed with the sound of human voices. Leaving the cartridge behind, he rushed uphill, slightly away from the stream, scrambled through the dense young fir trees and dropped to all fours, struggling to keep his breath under control.

His first impression was that everything was quiet except for the distant gurgling of the stream and the rustle of the treetops. A *Föhn** wind was now blowing through them, and a disheveled corner of a storm cloud sailed into view from behind the mountains. Rain was imminent. Ivan cautiously

* *Föhn* – dry, warm wind in the Alps

looked around and ran his eyes over the stones and fir trees in the distance below, but there didn't seem to be anyone else. He was about to get up to run when he heard a slightly muted but urgent voice from behind.

“*Russo!*”

Ivan pressed himself closer to the ground and lowered his head. No, that was probably some *Häftling*** , not a German. However, why should he bother to wait for anyone, as if he were not already in enough trouble? He knew from personal experience how difficult it would be to make his own escape. It looked like the Germans had already raised the alarm, and it would not be that easy to get away.

He ran as fast as he could across the slope, climbing among stones and fir trees. The chatter of the stream faded as he left it farther behind. The rustle of the fir trees became louder and sharper. The fresh wind was swinging the treetops. The sun disappeared. A hazy cloud was stretching farther and wider across the saddened sky. The air was stuffy. The back of his coat was soaked with sweat. He had lost his striped beret somewhere and was using his hands to wipe his face, constantly watching his surroundings and listening. At one point, he stopped to catch his breath and heard the sputtering of motorcycles, still distant but persistent. There had to be a road nearby and, sure enough, the Germans were already surrounding the area. With a sinking feeling, Ivan strained his ears, trying to figure out the best avenue of escape, and then heard some vague sound and knew that someone was

* *Russo* – Russian (Italian)

** *Häftling* – prisoner (German)

running behind him. That was really bad. That could be a German and not a *Häftling* after all. Ivan slipped behind the mossy trunk of a fir tree, took his Browning, and clicked off the safety. The crackling of the motorcycles was getting closer. *The bastards are hemming me in*, he thought, the words flashing through his mind. Ivan looked around, dropped to one knee behind the fir tree, and lifted up his pistol. Someone's feet struck against the stones once again. He looked intensely at the place in the thicket where, he was absolutely certain, a human would appear. However, no one showed up for a while, keeping Ivan in suspense. Finally, the light, striped figure of what looked like a teenager ran out into an open space between trees. There was something lively about the figure running, looking around and glancing upwards.

"*Russo!*"

A woman? He was surprised and confused, and nearly swore in frustration. However, he was distracted by the roar of motorcycles, which had already caught up with him but were higher up the slope. Ivan spun around, uncertain where to go. He could easily be spotted here among the sparse tree trunks, and so he ducked into a small niche under a fairly steep rock and bent over, all agility and caution. The striped figure down below disappeared for a minute over the edge of the cliff, but he did not try to track it—he was more afraid of the motorcycles and was listening intently. All of a sudden, a young woman wearing an oversized coat with pulled-up sleeves and a red triangle on her chest appeared from behind a stone some twenty steps away. She quickly looked around from under a cap of longish black hair, and he noticed a joyous and lively sparkle in her equally black olive-like eyes.

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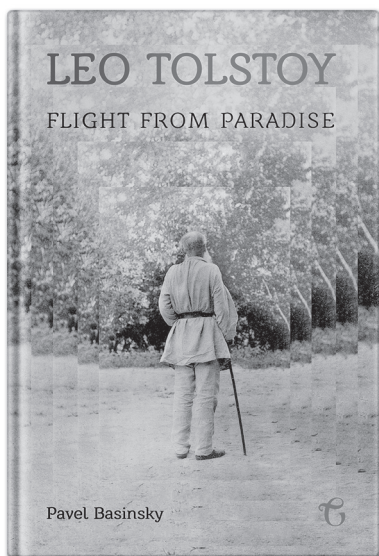
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Leo Tolstoy – Flight from Paradise

by Pavel Basinsky



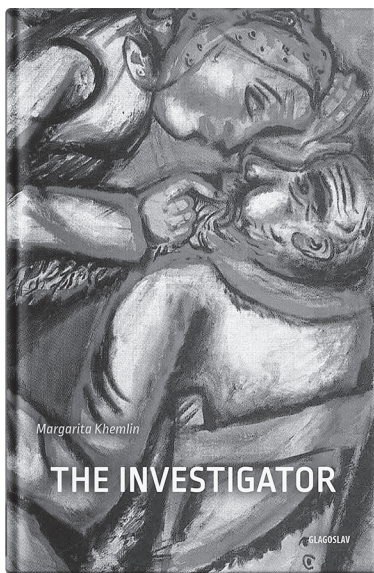
Over a hundred years ago, something truly outrageous occurred at Yasnaya Polyana. Count Leo Tolstoy, a famous author aged eighty-two at the time, took off, destination unknown. Since then, the circumstances surrounding the writer's whereabouts during his final days and his eventual death have given rise to many myths and legends. In this book, popular Russian writer and reporter Pavel Basinsky delves into the archives and presents his interpretation of the situation prior to Leo Tolstoy's mysterious disappearance. Basinsky follows Leo Tolstoy throughout his life, right up to his final moments. Reconstructing the story from historical documents, he creates a visionary account of the events that led to the Tolstoys' family drama.

Flight from Paradise will be of particular interest to international researchers studying Leo Tolstoy's life and works, and is highly recommended to a broader audience worldwide.

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The Investigator

by Margarita Khemlin



The Investigator is set in Soviet Ukraine in the early 1950s. With Stalin at the helm, the post-war Soviet Union is struggling to rebuild and to heal the nation of its multiple wounds. Plots and conspiracies abound and challenges to socialist values, real and imagined, proliferate.

A young woman is murdered in a typical Soviet town. In the spirit of the era everyone is a suspect. The investigator of the title sets out to solve the crime. A former intelligence officer who seeks to embody the ideals of the young Soviet Union, he introduces the reader to a polyphony of alternative voices that, together with his own, weave the unique fabric of this striking novel.

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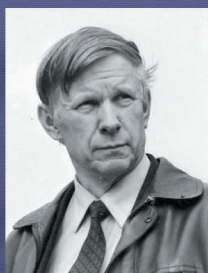
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Towards the end of World War II, a Belarusian soldier and an Italian girl escape from a Nazi concentration camp. The soldier wonders if he should get rid of the girl; she is a burden and is slowing him down. However, he cannot bring himself to abandon her in the snowy wilderness. Somewhere along the way, the two develop feelings for each other, but their love is not destined to grow beyond the edge of the mountains. Yet their bond cannot be denied, and in the end it proves stronger than death itself.

From the master of psychological narrative whose firsthand experience with World War II enabled him to re-create the ordeal on pages of his books, *Alpine Ballad* is Vasil Bykau's most heartfelt story. Bykau sends a powerful message to his readers: human values can be extrapolated and in the context of war people can still uphold their humanity.

An altruistic, philanthropic project of Glagoslav Publications, *Alpine Ballad* is coming out as a gesture of peace and a reminder to all of the human cost of wars that ransack our planet to this day.

Translated from Belarusian by Mikalai Khilo. The previous translations of *Alpine Ballad* were based on the Soviet-censored Russian version of the original manuscript.



Author Vasil Bykau (1924 – 2003) is a household name in Belarus and the most widely read Belarusian novelist outside his native country. Bykau's novels featuring World War II have been captivating minds and hearts of generations of readers in Belarus and beyond its borders. Hailing from a small Belarusian village, Bykau experienced the war as a young man and later, already a writer, transferred his memories onto

pages of his literary works. After the war, Bykau quickly became actively involved in promotion of Belarusian national revival, albeit clashing with the Soviet authorities. His moral courage and strong views on many issues earned him popularity among peers and a strong following in Belarus and abroad, where he had lived for many years. Today Vasil Bykau is remembered as a prolific, outspoken and daring writer whose prominent voice continues to inspire millions worldwide.



Glagoslav Publications

ISBN: 978-1-78437-944-5

London