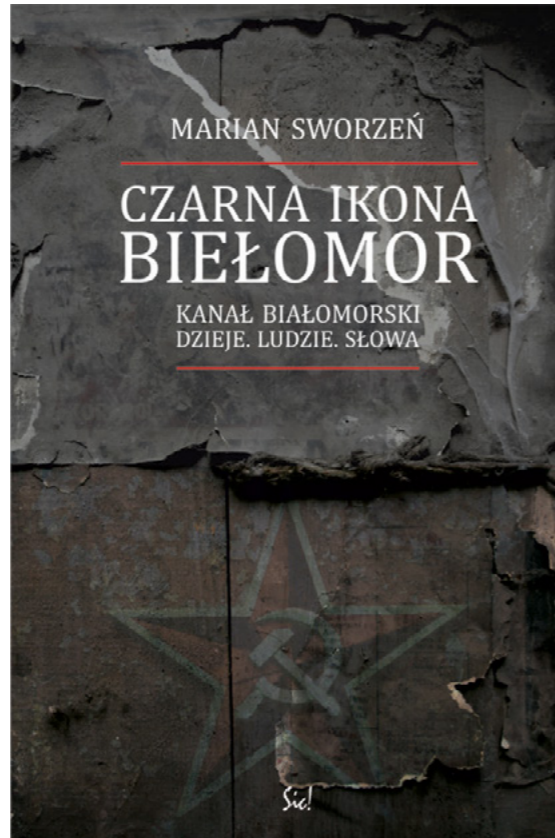


# Black Icon. Belomor

One of the most important Polish books on communism and Russia in recent years



SHORTLISTED FOR THE GDYNIA,  
ANGELUS AND MACKIEWICZ AWARDS

**B**lack Icon. Belomor is a monumental biographical and historical essay dedicated to the construction of the White Sea Canal in the USSR during 1931-1933, connecting the Baltic Sea with the White Sea. It was one of the flagship infrastructure projects of the Bolsheviks. Its construction was accompanied by boisterous propaganda, which ignored the fact that the Canal was built thanks to the slave labor of hundreds of thousands of political prisoners, of whom tens of thousands died. At the center of Marian Sworzeń's attention is a collective work that arose as a result of a journey made in 1933 by over one hundred Soviet writers to the place where the Canal was built. The authors of this "Tome", as it is called by Sworzeń, were nearly forty literati, among whom were people as well-known as Mikhail Zoszczenko and Maxim Gorki. The author of *Black Icon* describes and perceptively comments on the contents of the "Tome", reconstructs the biographies of its creators, recalls the fate of the participants of the 1933 voyage (for instance, Isaac Babel), and confronts the ideological lies with the dramatic biographies of the victims of the canal construction.

The title of Sworzeń's book is a metaphor for the Canal, and especially of the enormous sacrifice of human

life, the cost of its construction. The *Black Icon* is also an indictment of Bolshevism and an example of its moral and civilizational degeneracy, which the book's fragments of reportage superbly illustrate. At the same time, Sworzeń searches for the genesis of this murderous experiment among 19th-century utopians, such as the French communist Théodore Dézamy, who dreamed of "industrial armies" taming nature, and at the same time educating the "new man". The author also raises questions about the civilizational belonging of Russia, and warns artists against the slogan "engineers of human souls." He also shows that behind the crimes of communism were specific individuals and particular deeds and words that bear the responsibility for the tragedies of real people. *Black Icon* impresses with the author's erudition, literary talent, and personal involvement. This is one of the most important Polish books on communism and Russia in recent years.

Maciej Urbanowski, translated by Peter Obst

**I** became superintendent for the building of lock eighteen, the one nearest the sea. My people were former kulak peasants and thieves. I had to live with them and lead them.

My superiors were other engineers and those of the GPU State Political Directorate. (...) Before I realized it, a year had gone by. The lock was nearly completed, only the banks had to be finished. The work moved forward rapidly, the people worked because they had no other choice. In my group I lost no one – I am speaking of my sector. Yet I saw with my own eyes a group of peasants from Ukraine, how they came and walked off into the snow and cold and never returned. In such cases no one would look for those responsible! But if it would happen that a teamster had a horse drop dead, then he would not hear the end of it! I had seven hundred people under my command, which translated into seven hundred kilograms of bread per day. This was a valuable ration. The winter was hard; I quietly let out word that from each brigade one man could skip work for a day now and then. This happened everywhere ... Forced to work, we could not even dream of escape or rest; we were simply slaves..."

"Do you remember when the canal opened?" Unfortunately my question was not different from those that were posed at one time by people who came out from behind their desks in Leningrad or Moscow.

"All of that was already written about... They released the water, it started to fill the channel and push against the levees... they held! We opened the lock gates; they worked, water started to fill the lock... It could not have been otherwise, for then we would have had to start over, and work even faster, and who knows, our sentences could have been extended. But perhaps you don't want me to repeat myself..."

"No, in no way." I felt something like relief.

"After a while, something happened that you would find interesting. I was on duty and word came down that a ship, the *Vorshilov*, was going to pass through."

"Wasn't it the *Anokhin*?" I interrupted despite myself.

"No, it was the *Vorshilov*. It came, followed by a few barges. Then we saw that a steamboat was coming up, with a group of people on deck."

"And that was the *Anokhin*, with the writers."

"We know that now, but then... How was I to know that they were writers, all the more that they called themselves the writers' brigade... I was standing on the side of the lock and just gaped at them. I saw the

fashionable jackets, caps, shaved faces, horn-rimmed glasses, notebooks under their arms, photo cameras. All men, but then I glimpsed a few women... Do you know, there was even a raised platform for an orchestra with a podium for the conductor. This was an entirely different world sailing by! And then someone was calling to me from the deck, repeating once, twice; finally I heard him. He wanted to know what I was sentenced for and how long I had been there. What could have I told him? I was not able anymore to converse with normal people. I was frightened, not knowing what to shout back. That I am totally innocent? For such talk I could easily get another ten years tacked on to my sentence.

Excerpt translated by Peter Obst



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MARIAN  
SWORZEŃ

Born 1954

*Czarna ikona. Biełomor. Kanat Białomorski: dzieje, ludzie, słowa*  
[Black icon. Biełomor. The White Sea–Baltic Canal: History, People, Words]

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#### Books published

*Niepoprawni. Śpiewnik prozą*, 2006

*Melancholia w Faustheim. Powieść o rewolucji w Monachium*, 2008

*Opis krainy Gog*, 2011

*Inne życie. Biografia Jarostawa Iwaszkiewicza*, 2017

#### Selected awards

Gdynia Literary Prize (2012 – winner; 2018 – nomination)

Angelus Central European Literature Award (2018) – nomination

Józef Mackiewicz Literary Prize (2018) – nomination