

CAPONEU - The Cartography of the Political Novel in Europe

Alberts Bels

The Cage

Būris

Presented by: Daria Banasiewicz

The Cage (*Būris*), one of the most important novels to appear in Latvian literature, represents the intellectuals' resistance to the Soviet regime. The novel, written by Alberts Bels, was originally suppressed because it criticized authoritarianism and individual entrapment in an oppressive system. The book provides a complex psychological and existential portrait of its protagonist, Edmunds Berz, an engineer, who becomes mired in a surreal bureaucratic nightmare.

The plot features Berz finding himself the target of an investigation by an unnamed entity into an unspecified crime. He is also never quite sure exactly what he has done wrong, nor can he escape the system that dogs him relentlessly. Through surreal Kafkaesque experiences, Berz gradually recognizes that he is imprisoned within an invisible but all-pervasive ideological "cage." The real issue is not just the outside system he battles; it is also a struggle with his own conscience, identity, and sense of reality. Bels incorporated elements that echo the found manuscript theme, though it doesn't follow that structure in the traditional, overt sense. This strategy only reinforces the sensation of secret knowledge and denied truth, mirroring the experience of censorship in the Soviet era.

The book's structure mixes psychological realism with allegorical elements, opening itself to multiple interpretations — political, existential, and philosophical. The novel is a critique of Soviet authoritarianism and the various means of control that take away a person's agency. With this in mind, it addresses huge themes of watching, paranoia, and a loss of personal freedom. The story blurs the line between reality and illusion, diving deep into the main character's psychological state. Bel's predicament echoes a broader intellectual dilemma of those living in totalitarian societies and resonates with themes found in the works of Franz Kafka and George Orwell. *The Cage* became a pillar of Latvian dissident literature, the kind of book that inspires generations of writers and thinkers that come after. The novel resonated deeply in Soviet-occupied Latvia, but also with readers from other Eastern Bloc nations struggling under systemic oppression.

After Latvia became independent, the book was reread as a visionary piece of literature, recognizing the ongoing struggle for personal and national freedom, and reflecting the systemic tensions that eventually contributed to the collapse of the Soviet regime. Though it was initially delayed and subjected to censorship, *The Cage* has since come out in several editions in Latvia and been translated into several languages. The book has been translated and resumed 20 times in total to the following languages: Estonian (*Puur*, Tallinn: Eesti Raamat, 1974); Lithuanian (*Narvas*, Vilnius: Vaga, 1974); Czech (*Klec*, Praha: Svoboda, 1976; *Střelnice*, Praha: Odeon, 1981); Finnish (*Häkki*, Hämeenlinna: Arvi A. Karisto Osakeyhtiö, 1976); Latvian (*Būris: divi romāni*, Rīga: Liesma, 1972; *Izmeklētājs; Būris: divi romāni*, Rīga: Liesma, 1977; *Cilveki pilsetas: romāni*, Rīga: Liesma, 1988; *Būris*, Rīga: Zvaigzne ABC, 2000; *Būris*, Rīga: Zvaigzne ABC, 2015), Russian (*Голоц*

зовущего: романы, Москва: Известия, 1979; *Клетка*; *Полигон: романы*, Москва: Советский писатель, 1979; *Следователь*; *Клетка: романы*, Рига: Лиесма, 1982; *Lûdi v lodkah*, Rīga: Liesma, 1987), Slovak (*Klietka*; *Strelnica*, Bratislava: Tatran, 1981), Ukrainian (*Клітка: романи*, Київ: Дніпро, 1986), Romanian (*Cușca*; *Poligonul: romane*, București: Editura Univers, 1986), English (*The cage: a novel*, London: Peter Owen; Chester Springs, PA: Dufor Editions, 1990; *The cage*, London: Peter Owen Publishers, 2022), Spanish (*La jaula*, Madrid: Automática Editorial, 2023).

LANGUAGE: Latvian / Latviešu Valoda

CENSORSHIP STATUS: