

The icy waters of the White Sea Canal

(original title in French : Les Eaux glacées du Belomorkanal, Actes Sud 2009)

In the icy waters of Belomorkanal (the White Sea Canal) are mirrored glorious and painful times alike. Built in the years 1931-1933 by an army of Gulag inmates, the canal (also known as Stalin Canal) was immediately elevated to myth in literature, photography and film. Gorky, an enthusiastic supporter of the rehabilitation of the prisoners, called it “proof of the truth of communism”. Opponents of the regime claimed it was proof of the regime’s genocidal nature, branding the gigantic construction project a senseless piece of work. The canal gradually sank into oblivion to the point that for most Russians today Belomorkanal evokes little more than an obsolescent brand of cheap cigarettes. After a declining decade when only the people of Russian Karelia seemed concerned by the canal, since 2002 it has begun to regain some of its former activity.

Over a two-year period between 2006 and 2007, Anne Brunswic traveled along the canal in Karelia, visiting it whenever local authorities allowed. She stayed in towns and villages where the memory of the Soviet past is still very much alive, meeting with as many inhabitants as possible, Russians and non-Russians alike. She wrote down the testimonies of people of every persuasion, diehard believers, activists struggling to keep the memory of the camps alive, and deeply convinced communists. Travel book, historical investigation, narrative journalism, “geo-poetical” chronicles, **The Icy Waters of Belomorkanal** attempts to reveal what communism really was for those who lived under its system, what scars it left after its fall, and what still remains of the dream.