

FORUM

Kitten Heresy: Lost Contexts of Pussy Riot's Punk Prayer

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On August 17, 2012, following six months in custody, three key members of the feminist punk band Pussy Riot were sentenced to two years in prison. Their attempted performance in the Christ the Savior Cathedral of Moscow—of a punk prayer denouncing lone presidential candidate Vladimir Putin—was condemned by the court as an act of religious hatred. Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, Maria Alekhina, and Ekaterina Samutsevich began serving their sentences on September 3, 2012. Their version of the event is as clear as attempted media analyses in Russia and the west have been muddled, confused, or irrelevant. Rather than explaining the aim of Pussy Riot's action, subjecting it to proper analysis, and comparing it by analogue with the situation at home, western media have adopted the feminist anarchist collective, making them figureheads in a unilateral criticism of Russia. Despite their enthusing about the heroism of the Russian women, western commentators hardly go out of their way to support anarchist activists in their own countries, or indeed people facing court injustices or disproportionate prison terms.

In the following I draw attention to two areas overlooked by western media in their coverage of the Pussy Riot phenomenon. The first is the context of cultural activism (not popular music) from which the project emerged. The second is the context of religious faith, church institutions, and civic power in which Russians judge the performance of the punk prayer. The latter throws light on the controversy created by Pussy Riot's actions, a controversy extending deep into the ranks of their own supporters. Of course, the overlooked context extends far beyond these questions, but the limited space available here allows only for their brief outline.

Let's start by throwing a spanner in the works: Pussy Riot are not a case of Russian punk versus Putin. The Russian punk scene as such is not involved in any coordinated protest against the freshly re-elected Russian President. Punk in Russia is not a movement, and, even if it were, Pussy Riot would not be part of it. This is reflected in the limited response of the so-called Russian musical underground to Pussy Riot and to their arrest.

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Exceptions from this rule include the rapper Siava, the first to dedicate a song to Pussy Riot. His “Maliava Pussy Riot” [“A Prison Letter to Pussy Riot”] was released in April 2012. Then silence reigned until August, when Elizium, an emo-core band from Nizhniy Novgorod, brought Pussy Riot slogans to the stage of the music festival Kubana. Around the same time, BARTO, a Moscow feminist electro-punk band featuring St Petersburg rapper Ka4, released their track “Kis’ia eres” [“Kitten Heresy”].

This relative silence relates to the fact that Pussy Riot does not actively share networks, band members, or infrastructure with other punk bands. They consider themselves art-activists and place their work not in the context of music, but in that of cultural activism in the tradition of Prigov, Brenner, Kulik, and other provocative artists of the 1990s. Pussy Riot sprang out of the art-collective Voina [War]. Like their performances, those of Pussy Riot are meticulously designed for dissemination via the Internet and their primary aim is to provoke strong reactions from the general public and Russian authorities via the media. The songs that accompany their YouTube postings are prerecorded. Both video images and sound are subject to thorough editing after the fact, resulting in documentation videos with a carefully orchestrated illusion of spontaneity. Such an approach is somewhat alien to the concept of punk gigs, where the emphasis lies on bringing an audience to a boil in the here-and-now.

Whilst they call themselves a punk band and their actions take the form of surprise gigs in public places, Pussy Riot’s form of punk rock is a vehicle for idealistic actions of social protest, subordinated to the demands of a political-artistic agenda. Their every move—down to their arrest, imprisonment, and conviction—is meticulously planned by the highly intelligent activist members. They have profound knowledge not only of the way the Russian government, security apparatus, and judicial system operate, but also of the nature of Russian and world media. A principal goal of Pussy Riot’s performances has been to draw international attention to the flaws of a Russian judicial system that allows itself to be used by the Government to silence unwanted criticism. Whilst they have been accused of drawing attention away from cases of other activists such as Taisiia Osipova, jailed for eight years for possession of drugs with a street value of less than \$15, their goal is precisely the opposite. Their high-risk venture evidently faces obstacles, some of which are self-generated. These are partly related to media exposure and international attention, but perhaps most prominently to the nature of religious feelings in Russia.

The history of Pussy Riot begins within Voina. The first protest involving a punk performance with microphones, mini-amplifiers, and electric guitars took place in May 2009, in the Taganskii District Court of Moscow. The song, subtly entitled “Cock in the Ass,” protested against the repression of cultural life, artists, and intellectuals by the federal government. Voina became famous for their 2010 painting of a 65-meter-tall phallus on the Liteinyi drawbridge, which is situated directly opposite the FSB’s St Petersburg headquarters. Other actions included the staging of a sex orgy inside the State Museum of Biology and the Decembrist Commemoration—a public hanging of immigrants, homosexuals, and transsexuals inside a supermarket (both 2008). Voina

also targeted the church in a video from July 3, 2008, which documents just how openly shoplifting can be done when dressed as a Russian Orthodox priest.

Pussy Riot formed in November 2011, partly in response to Vladimir Putin's announcement that he would run for a third term of presidency. Whilst the members, appearing incognito in their brightly colored balaclavas, acknowledged inspiration from the Riot Grrrl movement, they underlined that their use of punk is purely a vehicle of social protest. Rather than renting venues and charging audiences entry fees, they would only perform after occupying the venues of their own choice. As they began their series of unsanctioned hit-and-run gigs in public places, they described their activist agenda as follows:

[F]eminism; resistance to organs of social control; the rights of gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transsexuals; anti-Putinism and the radical decentralization of the organs of power; preservation of the Khimkin forest; and the relocation of the Russian capital to Eastern Siberia. (Pussy Riot, "Osvobodit bruschatku")

As the anti-Putin protests began gaining momentum during the weeks leading up to the parliamentary elections, Pussy Riot, in one of their unanimous declarations, announced that they sympathized with the cause of the protesters, but that in their view only widespread illegal demonstrations and, ultimately, revolution could achieve lasting change. Like Voina before them, Pussy Riot chose symbolic dates for their performances. The first three surprise gigs, all held in November and December 2012, received relatively little attention, but testify to an agenda very similar to that of Voina, with an added emphasis on radical feminism. The live performances were documented, edited, and posted on YouTube with a prerecorded soundtrack and linked to richly commented photographic reports on *Live Journal*.

The punk prayer was the fifth Pussy Riot performance and was uploaded on February 21, 2012. It has received the bulk of media attention, and the basics of the event are by now public knowledge. A few facts could do with repeating, however. The video is made up of two performances, both of which were interrupted within forty seconds. The prerecorded soundtrack gives the illusion of a complete song being sung, whilst the video images, despite their careful editing, testify to a rather chaotic event. Whilst western media have appropriately enough concentrated on the prison sentences being out of proportion with the offense, little has been said to throw light on Pussy Riot's motives behind performing in the Christ the Savior Cathedral.

When Patriarch Kirill I publicly advised church members to vote for Putin, this came with a powerful historic precedence. The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) has been involved in a long power struggle with tsarist autocracy since it broke with Constantinople in the 1450s. Simultaneously, the church has been characterized by a frail alliance between a rural, layman-based spiritualism that highlighted pacifism, asceticism, and grace on the one hand, and a bureaucratically minded centralized urban clergy that emphasized church wealth, power, and political influence on the other. Whilst the former was closer to the hearts and minds of the masses, the church would struggle without the leadership abilities of the latter, who tended to value severe

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punishment of disobedience over meek forgiveness. The tension between the two approaches to the faith surfaced during the reign of Ivan III and resulted in a violent schism under Aleksei I. Each time, the bureaucratic-materialist wing emerged the stronger, but at the dear price of seeing church independence abolished by Peter the Great.

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The violent oppression of the church by the Bolsheviks following the 1917 revolution reflects the fact that the church had let itself become an inseparable part of tsarist rule. However, even Stalin's closing of churches and monasteries and his butchering of the priests and monks during the 1920s and 1930s failed to eradicate the deeply rooted spiritual awareness in the people, a popular faith that harked back to medieval practice. The German invasion of 1941 prompted a mobilization of the church in the resistance, and the ROC was rewarded with a restricted reopening of monasteries, churches, and an academy after the war. However, the education of priests became heavily infiltrated by the KGB, a practice that continued until the Soviet collapse. As a result, when the resurrection of the ROC began in 1988, it was as an organization with a significant spiritual backing in the people, but also with intimate connections to the Kremlin via the security apparatus. These connections remain active today, as do the tensions between the latest incarnation of the church bureaucracy and more spiritually oriented parts of the clergy. This is reflected in the minds of many Russians as an alert skepticism towards the church's institutions and their waging of political power, combined with ancient and deep-rooted God-fearing. These sentiments can be observed in Pussy Riot's punk prayer as well as in the reactions it provoked.

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The soundtrack to the punk prayer broke with the established Pussy Riot sound by including a church choir theme, mimicking Russian Orthodox liturgical song. The clear voices remain true to generic demands and carry no audible spite or irony. This enhances the effect of the prayer's words, which echo the title of the song, "Mother of God (Become a Feminist and) Chase Putin Away." The punk parts of the song follow the established Pussy Riot standard with drums, distorted bass, and guitar on mini-amps. Their vocals are highlighted by shouts of "Sran' gospodnia!" ("Shit of the Lord!"), directed at Putin and his retinue. The voices directed at Virgin Mary sound earnest and respectful; verbal aggression is reserved for Putin and his government. The punk prayer was performed during lent, carnival season in medieval times. Medieval carnival is known to have included mockery of church authorities, even swearing and indecent behavior from pulpits and altars. Parts of the clergy who were willing to forgive Pussy Riot have acknowledged this. In other words, as the rapper Siava put it, the girls went to church to pray in their own way.

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That the church leadership took a less pragmatic stance and demanded civic prosecution is hardly surprising in the light of historic precedent, but the fact that many of Pussy Riot's core supporters and high-profile followers were deeply disturbed by the performance has received little attention outside Russia. That the performance happened in front of the sacred altar, where only priests have admission, can only partly explain this. Also, the edited video version, on which most media analyses rest, gives the false impression of a work performed, whereas few know how events actually

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unfolded in the church. However, the main reason for the antipathy generated by the punk prayer is found on the spiritual level. Whilst many Russians would accept quite far-reaching criticism of the ROC as an institution, the self-professed atheists of Pussy Riot failed to convince their audiences of the main prerequisite for such critique: its foundation in sincere faith. As demonstrated by the punk band Ansambl' Khrista Spasitelia i Mat' Syra Zemlia [Christ the Savior Band and Mother Earth], the ROC can be verbally flogged and desecrated to an extent that far surpasses the least sympathetic reading of Pussy Riot's prayer, but only insofar as the corruption and amoralities of the church as an institution are targeted from the position of living Christian faith. A failure to acknowledge this may have limited the appeal of the punk prayer.

The date of Pussy Riot's appeal against their two-year prison sentences was set for October 1, 2012. The courageous feminist activists will no doubt succeed in keeping the world's eyes on the Russian judicial system's dubious practices for some time still. Regrettably, however, any western criticism that may result from it will be met with deaf ears by the Putin administration. And so it will remain for as long as our media remain bent on single-sided condemnation of Russia and keep any self-scrutiny off the schedule. Again, our journalists will all too eagerly draw our attention away to the colorful balaclavas of Pussy Riot. Meanwhile our Bradley Mannings, Julian Assanges, and Gary McKinnons are conveniently left out of the debate. Meanwhile a 23-year-old London student serves six months in prison for stealing a £3.50 water bottle during the London riots. Meanwhile Guantánamo still exists. Meanwhile the failures and erratic and arbitrary sentences of our own judicial systems remain. Is it any wonder the Kremlin remains indifferent to criticism from the west? Improvement of Russian justice starts at home. Before we acknowledge this, our media's attention, sympathy, and enthusiasm help neither Pussy Riot nor any other unjustly jailed Russian.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Dr Ivan Gololobov for valuable input, thoughts, and links of great value to this article.

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