

Contextualizing Pussy Riot in Russia and Beyond

Written by Jennifer Suchland

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2012/08/28/contextualizing-pussy-riot-in-russia-and-beyond/>

JENNIFER SUCHLAND, AUG 28 2012

Three members of the Russian feminist punk band Pussy Riot were sentenced to two years in prison on August 17, 2012 for their guerilla performance in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior. Two other band members have fled Russia to avoid prosecution while pro-Pussy Riot demonstrations and signs of solidarity are spreading across the globe. The official criminal charge is "hooliganism motivated by religious hatred." The case against Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, Yekaterina Samutsevich and Maria Alyokhina is a clear indication of the gross power asymmetry between citizen voices and political elites in Russia. However, with additional contextualization, the case reveals the highly symbolic implications of their February "Punk Prayer" performance for Russia as well as for global feminism and progressive movements.

Part I

Pussy Riot is a loose collective that was born out of anger against the Putin regime and the complacency that runs through the populace. Band member Serafima stated in a recent interview that "we realized that this country needs a militant, punk-feminist, street band that will rip through Moscow's streets and squares, mobilize public energy against the evil crooks of the Putinist junta and enrich the Russian cultural and political opposition." [i] And since late 2011 the band has been ripping and roaring. In December 2011 Pussy Riot staged a concert on the roof of a detention center where opposition leader and activist Alexei Navalny was being held. [ii] A month later the band performed in (and "occupied" in their words) Moscow's Red Square. Due to Russia's strict protest laws, police took band members into custody. They were released later after paying a fine. Then, on February 21st the band performed the now famous "Punk Prayer" in front of the Iconostasis of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior. Weeks later, and right before the March 4th presidential election, Pussy Riot members Alyokhina and Tolokonnikova were arrested and then later joined by Samutsevich.

In addition to their colorful and anonymizing balaclavas, the performances of Pussy Riot have a stylistic similarity. [iii] The group is opposed to traditional concerts and has stated that they have no commercial interests. Their "concerts" are not your typical crowded mosh pit. Instead they use a documentary technique wherein they put on a largely symbolic performance and document it with film and photography. Fusing a hybrid of live performance, documentary film and blog transmission, they construct their message to build an audience. Like others looking for a space for free speech in Russia, Pussy Riot uses Livejournal (one of the most popular free speech platforms in Russia) and Twitter to post their work and engage with the growing international commentary on it. [iv] Thus, knowledge of Pussy Riot is largely by virtual consumption. This strategy, mixed with their post-live style, makes Pussy Riot a kind of conceptual band – a feminist punk band willing to speak its mind. As we have seen, this strategy defies the restrictive state-society relations created in Putin's Russia by circumventing the constraints of formal civil society.

The staging of the Christ the Savior performance was Pussy Riot's most provocative and symbolic to date. The blasphemous contrast between the color-clad women and the holy surroundings hit a sweet spot of national and political vulnerability. The actual length of the performance was quite short (under one minute) and was to a miniscule audience. The Punk Prayer consisted of ritualized prostrations to the Madonna to get rid of Putin. Later a video was created that inserted amplified music and video clips from the event. [v] How could a video less than two minutes long provoke such a seemingly overbearing response? Of course, one obvious reason is that Pussy Riot

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used the trope of Russian Orthodoxy to convey their message. This was a double sin. The first insult was against Putin, but they had done that before. The second sin was to call out the politicization of the Orthodox Church, in particular Patriarch Kirill and his promotion of Vladimir Putin. Pussy Riot's performance parodied the political and religious union between Russian politics and the Orthodox Church. But this parody hits hard in a country that has used Orthodoxy to find itself in the post-Soviet era. Russian Orthodoxy has been "reborn" and now serves a religious as well as civic function in society. The signs and symbols of Russian Orthodoxy have helped redefine Russian national meaning in the wake of Soviet collapse. Thus, it is not just a religious offense that Pussy Riot staged their guerilla performance in a cathedral, but a national one as well.

But for those in tune to the local history, it was not just any cathedral in Moscow, but the infamous Cathedral of Christ the Savior. The complexity of this 40-second Punk Prayer is even more interesting if we consider the history of the location. The site of the Cathedral has a long history of ideologically supercharged symbolism. The first plans for the Cathedral were to create the world's largest church to commemorate Russia's victory over Napoleon in the war of 1812. From the very beginning, church and state stood as one as the Cathedral was viewed as a religious war memorial. It was constructed over several decades (1831-1881) and upon completion was Russia's largest church. However, the cherished Convent of St. Alexius the Man of God was demolished in order to make space for the Cathedral and thus cast the Cathedral as a symbol of political manipulation. Founded in 1360, the Convent was the oldest of Moscow's convents and represented the idea of Moscow as the Third Rome. It also stood on land that architects believed to be ideal for their new Cathedral. As Dmitri Sidirov explains, the destruction of the convent to clear a place for a new state memorial represented an injustice that continues to be acknowledged today.[vi] Destruction of the Convent supposedly prompted one senior nun to cast a curse that nothing would stay firmly at that place.[vii] That 19th century premonition has thus far been true.

Ironically, in 1931 the Cathedral of Christ the Savior was demolished to clear space for the Palace of the Soviets, a new monument in honor of Soviet power. This massive 415 metre high building was never accomplished. Instead, a large foundation pit sat for years and then became, under Khrushchev, the world's largest outdoor swimming pool – and possibly the site's most democratic embodiment. For years the space symbolized the failure of the Communist dream until intellectual, political and religious figures mobilized in the early 1990's to rebuild the Cathedral of Christ the Savior. Some argued that a replica of the Cathedral was problematic and that any reconstruction should preserve its complex history. But Moscow authorities dominated the decision-making process and ultimately decided that an exact replica would be built. In many respects, the current Cathedral of Christ the Savior represents a brazen attempt to reclaim national honor (and power) in the wake of Soviet failure, which has ultimately undermined a reconciliation of past religious and social misdeeds.

Pussy Riot chose one of the most politically charged spaces in Russia to stage their Punk Prayer. In an artful act of blasphemy, Pussy Riot reminded the Russian populace how the edifice of the church can shield corrupt power. Their saccharine masks and tights are not vulgar against the sacred mosaic facades within the Cathedral. It is the Cathedral that represents the grotesque deeds of a weak state directing its resources away from real problems and people to the construction of an architectural symbol of power. This message would not have been conveyed if they had chosen any other Orthodox Church in Moscow.

Part II

Pussy Riot may be a shock to the Russian system but the group also challenges a long-standing stereotype about Russian feminism – namely, that it does not exist. The group's existence, and clear connections to political matters outside of Russia, is proof to the contrary. This fact has gone largely unnoticed in the popular press coverage of the group and the recent legal case against them.[viii] Pussy Riot's popularity in the western press is not only due to their anti-Putin antics, but also to the shock-value the group has in the western imagination of the former evil empire. Since the dismantling of Soviet state socialism, there has been an emphasis on two gendered stereotypes of the "second world" woman – she is either a traditional woman "reborn" by the over-emancipation of a de-feminized Soviet model *or* she is a tragic victim of sexual violence caught in the tentacles of human trafficking. There is no doubt that Russia suffers, like most nations, from cultural and political systems of sexism, racism and homophobia. Yet, the misunderstanding and mistranslation of second world "feminism" has marginalized this region of the world in

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western, and global, formulations of feminism.

Part of this misunderstanding is due to an insistence on finding expressions of western-style feminism. Generally speaking, traditional U.S. feminist issues, such as reproductive rights, do not have the same kind of political terrain in former state socialist countries. One important reason is because of the way that Soviet state socialism viewed women's economic rights as the linchpin to their civic equality. Access to women's health services was entwined with nationalist discourses of population. As such, reproductive rights issues tended to be about population needs in conjunction (or tension with) economic necessities. While abortion may be a newly charged issue (as it is in Poland), it is not politically equivalent to the U.S. experience. The upshot of this example is that feminist political expression does not happen in the same mode across the globe.

While the former second world is not a homogenous context, it is the case that feminist activism and thought often is entwined with national and economic questions. Thus, in thinking about Pussy Riot as a conceptual guerilla performance group, we should consider how they utilize anti-Putin views in conjunction with critiques of Russian patriarchal society. The anonymous costumes represent a form of activism that is not based on identity politics – we cannot even tell who the women are. Sadly, the group probably would not have received so much attention if their rioting were “just” about women. But Pussy Riot is always about many things. Take the group's most recent response to the trial of three of its members. In the song “Putin Lights the Fires of Revolution” the lyrics are a feminist charged diatribe against Putin. In the first stanza of the song they say: “Every arrest is carried out with love for the sexist who botoxed his cheeks and pumped his chest and abs.”^[ix] And with a nod to the parodied Brezhnev and Honeker fraternal kiss, they tell Putin to “Go and marry Father Lukashenko.”^[x] Sometimes parody and irony are the best antidotes to absurdity.

Pussy Riot is a unique, homegrown Russian feminist punk band with a grudge against Vladimir Putin but also is connected to political and artistic centers outside of Russia. In interviews they have discussed their musical influences, including bands such as Bikini Kill and Sham 69. Their song lyrics too speak about Egypt and Tahrir Square. And many outside of Russia have come to their defense. So, as onlookers observe the antics of Pussy Riot we should try to situate the group's message globally and not just in Russia. Their message may not be just about Russia. Vladimir Putin is power-hungry, corrupt and controlling but he is part of a post-Cold War political landscape that is no longer based on a bipolar axis of power. Putin's Russia is not an “other” but an example of neoliberal governance. The trial of Pussy Riot is an indication of extreme repression, but the tentacles of that repression exist across the globe. While Pussy Riot's unapologetic embracing of the F-word may be unique in Russia, sadly the eschewing of the F-word is not unique to Russia.

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[i] Interview by Henry Langston. http://www.vice.com/en_uk/read/A-Russian-Pussy-Riot

[ii] A link to Navalny's Livejournal page: <http://navalny.livejournal.com/>

[iii] When asked why they chose to stay anonymous, one member explained “Our goal is to move away from personalities and towards symbols and pure protest.” <http://www.vice.com/read/A-Russian-Pussy-Riot>

[iv] Pussy Riot Livejournal page: <http://pussy-riot.livejournal.com/>

[v] <http://youtu.be/GCasuaAczKY>

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[vi] Dmitri Sidorov. "National Monumentalization and the Politics of Scale: The Resurrections of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 90(3), 2000, p.548-572.

[vii] Sidorov, p. 556.

[viii] One exception is a piece written by Masha Gessen: <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/08/18/pussy-riot-modern-russian-women-trapped-in-putin-s-time-machine.html>

[ix] <http://youtu.be/VxvQh02KRcw>

[x] <http://iconicphotos.wordpress.com/2010/08/02/the-fraternal-kiss/>

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