



## Reviews

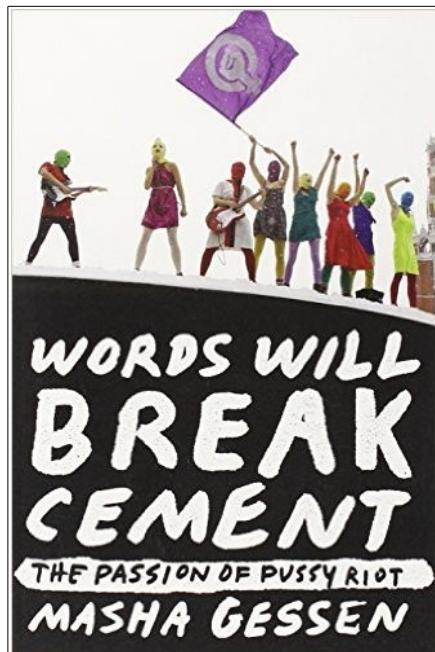
**Words Will Break Cement: The Passion of Pussy Riot**, by Masha Gessen. New York: Riverhead Books, 2014, 308 pp., Paperback, \$16.00; ISBN 978-1-59463-219-8. Language: English.

We are not Pussy Riot right now', said Nadezhda Tolokonnikova—a surprising disavowal of the world's hottest protest band by its most telegenic representative. Tolokonnikova was speaking at a press conference with her partner in pussy rioting, Maria Alyokhina—the first since the pair's early release from prison in December 2013. Like fellow political prisoner and Putin antagonist Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the women owed their freedom to a presidential amnesty widely regarded as a bid for international goodwill in the run-up to the Sochi Olympics.

Incarcerated for performing a profanity-laced 'punk prayer' in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour—an act that deliberately blurred the line between political action and aesthetic expression—Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina now appeared eager to abandon the potentially lucrative brand identity they had worked so hard to build. Henceforth, they announced, they would dedicate themselves to the slow and unglamorous campaign for improved prison conditions across Russia at the helm of a new organization called Zona Prava [Zone of Rights].

Displaying the new-media savvy that had helped make Pussy Riot famous, Tolokonnikova noted that Zona Prava would be financed neither by individuals nor the government, but through crowdfunding. Russian lacks a word for 'crowdfunding', so Tolokonnikova simply used the English one. This small moment encapsulated Pussy Riot's recipe for success: Take one historically intractable 'accursed question'—say, widespread corruption or lack of political transparency. Add a critical theory (latter-day Marxism), protest style (riot grrl), or PR technique (viral videos) that the West can easily recognize and digest. Agitate with abandon.

How this syncretic strategy came to be and the wages of its vigorous application during the Snow Revolution of 2011-13 are the subjects of Masha Gessen's *Words Will Break Ce-*



ment: *The Passion of Pussy Riot*. Structured like a *Bildungsroman*, the volume chronicles the lives of the three Pussy Riot members before, during and after the events of February 2012, when they performed at the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour. The first section, ‘Becoming Pussy Riot’, contains biographical sketches of Tolokonnikova, Alyokhina and Ekaterina Samutsevich, their somewhat less prominent comrade-in-arms. Each young woman is portrayed as a rebellious loner chafing under Russian societal mores. Gessen deftly highlights those experiences the girls had in common: all three grew up in single-parent households with idiosyncratic but permissive mothers or fathers; all rejected traditional education and largely directed their own learning; two (Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina) had children in their late teens. It was almost inevitable, Gessen suggests, that these three women would find their way to avant-garde art and thus to each other. They met in the late 2000s through the street-art collective Voina [War], whose tongue-in-cheek performances excoriated corrupt practices small and large, from the bribery of traffic police to Dmitry Medvedev’s 2008 ‘election’ to the Russian presidency. Pussy Riot formed in 2011 as a loose grouping of guerrilla punk rockers. Their explicit mission was to bring the irreverent feminism popularized by Western bands like Bikini Kill to Russian shores.

Having briefed her readers on Pussy Riot’s history, Gessen moves to ‘Prayer and Response’, a granular description of the group’s most infamous performance and its aftermath. This is by far the book’s strongest section — tightly wound and systematic, it traces the ‘punk prayer’ from origins to execution. It also contains a lengthy, riveting account of the trial itself, which Gessen frames as a drama of Shakespearean proportions: the defendants channel old-school Soviet dissidents like Anatoly Sharansky in impassioned speeches meant not so much for the court as for posterity; outside the courthouse, crowds of supporters defy police in creative protests; the defence lawyers are well intentioned but uncharismatic; witnesses for the prosecution insist that Pussy Riot’s actions caused them lasting emotional trauma in the face of incontrovertible evidence to the contrary. Many Western readers will already be familiar with the broad strokes of Pussy Riot’s trial, but Gessen offers the eyewitness precision and cultural context they will need to grasp the proceedings’ stakes and history.

‘Punishment’, the third panel in Gessen’s triptych, attempts to provide a satisfying conclusion to a story that was still on-going when the author was completing her manuscript. After Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina were sentenced to two years of imprisonment and transferred to separate Siberian penal colonies in the final months of 2012, Gessen could no longer follow them as closely as she had during the trial. Meanwhile, Samutsevich, who had received a suspended sentence due to her minimal participation in the performance, was keeping a relatively low profile. To compensate for Gessen’s loss of direct access to her subjects, the final section of *Words Will Break Cement* includes long excerpts from letters Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina wrote from prison. Just as Gessen was finishing the book, Tolokonnikova declared a hunger strike to protest the inhuman labour conditions in her Mordovian penal colony and subsequently disappeared from view, resurfacing twenty-six days later in a Krasnoyarsk prison hospital. This is where Gessen leaves her, the book’s chronology breaking off just weeks before Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina were amnestied.

Of course, neither Gessen nor her publishers could have predicted this turn of events, and the book’s release could not have been delayed indefinitely. In any case, an account of the women’s lives following their release from prison would have compromised the narrative’s martyrological framing. The volume’s centre of gravity is its long middle section, the ‘Passion’ to which the title refers. Given that Christ’s own Passion ended with his crucifixion on Mount Calvary, it would be incongruous to include a Descent from the Cross, much less a Resurrection, in a Passion-like story. These events, though important to Tolokonnikova and

Alyokhina, as well as their families, friends, band-mates, journalists and a global network of supporters, definitively fall outside the scope of Gessen's project.

Indeed, as the book jacket proclaims, Gessen aims to tell 'the heroic story of Pussy Riot, which resurrected the power of truth in a society built on lies.' Together with the book's subtitle, 'The Passion of Pussy Riot', this suggests that Gessen aims not to document or even analyse, but to canonize. This gambit has several advantages: first, it subversively engages with the religious sentiments that suffused public perception of Pussy Riot's protest action and gave the kangaroo court the juridical ammunition it needed to convict. In this interpretation, Tolokonnikova, Alyokhina and Samutsevich, far from engaging in frivolous iconoclasm, were selfless martyrs to the cause of free speech. Gessen's martyrological approach also has the benefit of being incendiary, a *sine qua non* for a book about Russian politics written in 2012-13. Maintaining Western interest in post-Soviet Russia, even when egregious human rights abuses are involved, always takes some rhetorical *chiaroscuro*.

Yet in spite of its advantages, a quasi-religious portrayal of Tolokonnikova and her colleagues misses the point. Yes, the women dared to challenge a corrupt political system and bravely paid the price for their 'transgression.' Yes, they remixed Viennese Actionism and Brezhnev-era dissident culture (among other influences) to produce an infectious DIY punk aesthetic. And yes, they brought a badly needed feminist perspective to Russian public discourse.

But they did none of these things in a saintly manner. To Gessen's credit, she does not omit episodes that detract from Pussy Riot's image as selfless, spontaneous idealists—for instance, the registration of Pussy Riot as a brand during the trial. That she elides other troubling moments, like the clash with Pyotr Verzilov, Tolokonnikova's husband and Pussy Riot's de facto PR manager, is not just understandable, but laudably feminist. Fascinating though Verzilov may be, his is not the salient role in a story about an all-female protest punk collective.

It is tempting to follow this logic to its limit, passing over all fault lines in Pussy Riot's image as irrelevant to their anti-establishment program. But this would be a mistake, because the group's internal tensions and interpersonal conflicts are indivisible from their most innovative technique: the transformation of serious political protest into an irresistible product. Self-commodification has been integral to Pussy Riot's mission from its inception, contributing to the group's enormous mobilizing power and global reach. By engaging with market forces rather than resisting or ignoring them, Pussy Riot has earned dividends in the most important currency of all: attention. In doing so, they have created a new form of dissidence.

Though Pussy Riot was officially trademarked only in August 2012, the push to construct a recognizable brand began much earlier. All of Pussy Riot's protests were conceived in terms of their potential media virality. As Gessen notes, Tolokonnikova initially deemed the action at the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour a failure because it had been cut short, which meant that there would be little material for a video. Pussy Riot's most celebrated action therefore only exists in meta-form—few people witnessed it as it was performed, since the women had deliberately avoided disrupting a service and the cathedral was all but empty. Those who watched the event on YouTube and other sites saw not the action itself but its simulacrum: a mash-up of rehearsal footage shot days before in a less prominent church.

As soon as we recognize the commercial side of Pussy Riot not as an unsavoury bug, but as a highly productive feature, any seeming contradictions within their project simply dissolve. How can a group with nominally Marxist roots become an international brand with its own line of souvenir products? If Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina are singled out for fame and fortune, in particular receiving the LennonOno Peace Grant for their work on Pussy Riot, how anonymous, interchangeable and anti-hierarchical can their group really be? How seri-

ously can we take a pair of Russian revolutionaries who star in *House of Cards*, a show that traffics in the crassest American stereotypes about Russians?

If we frame Tolokonnikova, Alyokhina and their comrades-in-arms as successors to the dissident movements of the Soviet 1960s, these questions seem to point at discrediting flaws in their *modus operandi*. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine prisoners of conscience like Andrei Sinyavsky or Anatoly Marchenko doing ads for a fashion label or appearing in *Vogue*, the same way it strains credibility to think that Elizabeth Cady Stanton would ever participate in a SlutWalk. But the generational divide between Pussy Riot and their predecessors does not invalidate their protest tactics. On the contrary, it underscores the felicitous malleability of dissident practices, which can now funnel an insatiable international demand for nubile Russian ingénues into the pursuit of a meaningful political agenda.

Two days after leaving prison, Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina submitted to an interview with socialite-cum-journalist Ksenia Sobchak, who peppered them with aggressively frivolous questions ('Masha, I have to ask: what is going on with your eyebrows?') Global reactions to the interview skewed toward outrage, with listicle factory BuzzFeed, itself no stranger to frivolity, running a typically gif-heavy piece called 'The 12 Most Ridiculous Moments From Pussy Riot's First TV Interview.' Yet for all her obvious delight in goading her subjects, Sobchak was one of the few journalists who did Pussy Riot a service during the feeding frenzy that followed the amnesty. By taking Pussy Riot seriously as a brand, Sobchak pushed Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina to refine their still-inchoate media strategy—the one area where they could not afford to falter if they hoped to keep the international spotlight on Russia's human rights abuses. In today's world, strong viral marketing, not words, will break cement.

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