

## 'Black Robe, Golden Epauettes': From the Russian Dissidents to Pussy Riot

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### Abstract

The arrest of the members of Pussy Riot, their imprisonment and their trial has attracted great interest worldwide, and some commentators pointed out that the young women in this feminist punk band could be considered as the heirs to the Russian dissidents. The article explores this link further and shows that the action which made this feminist punk band famous can indeed be seen as a continuation of the combat of dissidents who, as of the mid-1960s, fought for the genuine independence of the Russian Orthodox Church from the State, and who denounced the infiltration of the Church by the KGB, an infiltration that the Church itself has never publicly condemned. Therefore the various predecessors of Pussy Riot include an archbishop, priests, lay people such as Solzhenitsyn, young hippyish intellectuals and – already – feminist believers.

### Keywords

Pussy Riot; dissidence; KGB; Orthodoxy; Solzhenitsyn; Russia.

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*But after this lying who is to perform the Eucharist?*

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

The arrest of the members of Pussy Riot in March 2012, followed by their trial, guilty verdict, imprisonment and subsequent legal tribulations, has attracted

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great interest worldwide, and some commentators soon pointed out that the young women in this feminist punk band are the heirs to the Russian dissidents who, as of the mid-1960s, spoke out against human rights violations in the USSR, including the rights of religious believers. In August 2013 journalist Masha Gessen went so far as to describe Pussy Riot as the 'Solzhenitsyn of our times', going on to explain that

Pussy Riot allowed the Western public to identify with them, thereby performing the same feat vis-à-vis Putin's State as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn had done against Soviet power when he published *The Gulag Archipelago* in the 1970s. Both profoundly altered the relationship between the West and the regime in Russia. (Gessen 2013)

This comparison is open to debate, concentrating as it does on the consequences of their action rather than on the action itself. But shortly beforehand the former dissident Aleksandr Podrabinek had also claimed that Mariya Alëkhina – whom he defended in court in May 2013 – was the 'heir to traditions of dissidence' (Svetova 2013a). And in this instance he clearly was referring to her protest, even though he was talking of her actions in the prison camp rather than those leading to her arrest.

The link is certainly worth exploring further, especially as repeated references by Mariya Alëkhina and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova indicate that they know the history of Russian dissidence and its key figures. So the action for which they are famous, and that was the explicit reason for their arrest, may be seen as a continuation of the combat of dissidents who fought for the genuine independence of the Russian Orthodox Church from the State, and who denounced the infiltration of the Church by the KGB, and indeed there are certain striking similarities. Their various predecessors included an archbishop, priests, lay people such as Solzhenitsyn, young hippyish intellectuals and – already – feminist believers.

## Denouncing the Compromises of the Russian Orthodox Church

According to members of Pussy Riot, their group emerged from a circle of artists and poets who were defending the Khimki forest, and it was formed after Dmitrii Medvedev announced, on 24 September 2011, that Vladimir Putin would be running for President for the third time. Members of the group shared one principled stance, affirmed Mariya Alëkhina: 'We do not accept the authoritarianism and supremacy of Vladimir Putin's power' (Kostyuchenko 2012d). These young women claimed to be feminists and got engaged in political art, just as the group Voina, with which Pussy Riot had links. They chose to wear short dresses, colourful tights and playful masks, and philosopher Mikhail Yampol'skii noted that their outfits seemed inspired by Malevich's paintings, where characters often do not have faces, which could explain the balaclavas. He added that, in 1918, Malevich denounced the destruction of Christianity by the Church and declared essential to restore Christianity with the help of artistic culture (Yampol'skij 2012). Which is, for some observers, what Pussy Riot started doing.

Pussy Riot first got noticed when, on 14 December 2011, they danced on a prison's roof, and then, on 20 January, sang on the Red Square: 'Revolt in

Russia. Putin Got Scared' (Pussy Riot 2011–2012). By the chosen location and the approximate number of participants, the latter performance evokes the manifestation of August 25, 1968 against the intervention in Czechoslovakia. On 21 February 2012, Pussy Riot organised a 'Punk Prayer' in the church of Christ the Saviour, in the centre of Moscow. This performance lasted about forty seconds during which the young women were filmed by friends and journalists.<sup>1</sup> The church staff interfered and expelled the singers, without calling the police. According to a witness, silence and order were restored within three or four minutes (Kostyuchenko 2012b). Subsequently, after significant post-production, the shot images were broadcast over the Internet. This film shows five members of Pussy Riot dancing, singing and asking the Virgin Mary to 'put Putin away'. The chosen form is somewhat surprising given that it is part of an explicit punk aesthetic and that the Virgin Mary is called upon to appear alongside the opposition, echoing Aleksandr Blok's 1918 poem *The Twelve* in which Christ marches at the head of young revolutionaries. The chorus, 'Mother of God, put Putin away' seems to refer directly to what the fool-for-Christ says in Pushkin's play, *Boris Godunov*: 'It is not possible to pray for King Herod, the Mother of God forbids it'. The outfits and jumps make therefore sense: the young women were adopting the role, if not of the fool-for-Christ, at least – as they claimed it – of the buffoons (*shuty*) allowed to tell the truth to the most powerful men.

Furthermore, in this song the young protesters – who only had enough time to sing the first couplet (Kostyuchenko 2012d) – deplore the infringements of human rights within the Church and Russian society in general, as well as the pressure brought to bear on women to reassume their traditional role. Lastly, and this will be the focus of this article, they denounce 'Black robe, golden epaulettes' – the fact that priests and monks from the Russian Orthodox Church work for the Secret Service, collaborating with 'the head of the KGB, their chief saint' (in other words with the supreme leader of the Russian State), and that Orthodoxy is a State religion.

Three members of Pussy Riot were imprisoned in March 2012. In June 2012, after a third expert witness report (the only one the prosecution could build any case on), they were charged with 'hooliganism, committed by a group of persons acting on the basis of prior agreement for reasons of religious hatred' (article 213-2 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation). This charge ignored the political and artistic dimensions of the performance, and the young women were accused of having wanted to express their 'lack of respect for the Christian world and the canons of the Church' and of having 'deeply hurt and humiliated feelings and religious orientations of Orthodox believers' (*Postanovlenie o privilechenii v kachestve obvinyaemogo* 2012<sup>2</sup>). This was the closest to a charge of 'blasphemy', which does not exist in the Criminal Code of Russia, the Church being theoretically separated from the State.

On the other hand, the members of Pussy Riot were not charged with article 282 ('Actions aimed at the incitement of national, racial, or religious enmity, abasement of human dignity'), which is part of the measures adopted in Russia

<sup>1</sup> The original film is to be seen here: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FoJqzGG7u\\_k](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FoJqzGG7u_k).

<sup>2</sup> This text concerns mainly Nadezhda Tolokonnikova. We can presume that the other two indictments were exactly similar and therefore have not been put on the website of *Novaya Gazeta*.

since 2002 to fight against 'extremism', a term as blurred as used to be the word 'anti-Soviet'. The article 282 was already used against intellectuals, including, twice, in 2005 and 2007, against Yurii Samodurov, accused of organising art exhibitions hostile to religion.

The trial of the Pussy Riot members ran from 30 July to 8 August 2012 and, even before it, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova assured that their 'Punk Prayer' was 'purely political', that it was not directed against religion, but was intended to 'contribute to the development of civil society in its budding opposition to Putin's political system' (Kostyuchenko 2012a). But, although the question of the Russian Orthodox Church's collaboration with the political police and temporal power more generally is at the very heart of the song, this issue was not properly explored at the trial, as the judge was opposed to its being explicitly addressed. Noting that the third expert witness report described the line 'Black robe, golden epaulettes' – referring to the 'Chekist epaulettes beneath the cassock' – as 'defamatory', barrister Violetta Volkova emphasised that there were 'numerous confirmations of the fact that KGB and FSB collaborators worked in the Church', quoting the observation made in 1992 by the Archbishop of Vilnius and Lithuania: 'In our Church there are genuine KGBchniki who have seen their careers progress very rapidly. The Metropolitan of Voronezh, for example...'<sup>3</sup>. But at this point she was interrupted by Judge Syrova, who told her that it was not the place to give 'a history lesson' (Kostyuchenko 2012c,d). And although this was the crux of the problem, the court preferred to examine other questions.

## Debating the Women's 'Blasphemy' Rather than the Content of What They Said

The questioning of the witnesses and plaintiffs did seek to establish the facts – what did the Pussy Riot do, say, and sing in the church? – but also the kind of behaviour women are allowed in an Orthodox church. Several witnesses reproached the women not just for having a form of dress and behaviour considered indecent in such a place, but also for having organised their performance in parts of the church women are forbidden from entering: the mysterious *soleya* (Latin: solea) and *amvon* (Latin: ambo), as is called the elevated space in front of the altar (Kostyuchenko 2012a). The Pussy Riot deliberately chose to sing their Punk Prayer in this precise spot, and the members who have not been imprisoned have explained this choice by 'the fact that the Russian Orthodox Church is promoting very conservative values, which do not fit into such concepts as freedom of choice and the formation of political, gender and sexual identity, critical thinking, multiculturalism, attention to contemporary culture' (Pussy Riot 2012c).

Can a secular State accept that access to certain places is authorised for men and not for women, and place this issue at the heart of a trial? More generally,

<sup>3</sup> 'Cheka' is the first appellation of the 'KGB', which has now become the 'FSB'. A 'Chekist' worked for the Cheka, KGBchniki for the KGB, but members of the FSB are still often called 'Chekists' and they like calling themselves that way.

is it the role of a criminal court to rule on whether or not religious rules have been broken? Violetta Volkova also noted that according to the third expert report it is offensive to believers to associate the words 'Mother of God' and 'feminist' because 'the ideology of feminism is opposed to Orthodoxy'. Yet as she pointed out 'feminism is a movement for equal rights for women', and equality forms part of the Russian Constitution (Kostyuchenko 2012c). Another Pussy Riot defence lawyer, Nikolai Polozov, cited several articles of the Constitution (relating to sexual equality, freedom of conscience and creative freedom) and accused the court of not addressing the real problem: 'the Court is trying to exclude politics from this case, but that is impossible. These women sang ... to say that certain Russian politicians are destroying your country!' (Kostyuchenko 2012e).

For that matter the strange debates which took place during the trial showed that rules are in fact wholly relative in the Russian Church, for women are sometimes allowed to enter the *solea* – in order to clean it (Kostyuchenko 2012c). They are allowed to bare their arms and heads in consecrated places – in the Donskoi monastery for example – including in the two supposedly forbidden zones, contrary to what was stated in the expert report on which the accusation was based (Kostyuchenko 2012d). Furthermore reactions to any breaking of the rules are also very varied. One employee, on being asked what had happened to a woman who had entered a church naked, replied: 'Nothing, she was shown out, that's all' (Bobrova 2012).

During the Pussy Riot trial the judge and prosecutor clearly sought to concentrate on the two questions of the rules that hold in a church and of the specific place of women in such places, and this enabled them to avoid other more embarrassing and tricky issues, such as the persistent links between senior State officials, the hierarchs in the Church and the political police. And since the trial did not address this central question, it is important to give 'a history lesson', or at least a few reminders. This article, being in the field of intellectual history, will therefore examine conjointly the history of the Russian Orthodox Church in the 20th century, that of Russian dissidence, and the as yet incomplete history of the role the Soviet political police have played in the country's institutions, with an eye to identifying the legacy these various histories have had in discourse and social structures – precisely what the Pussy Riot denounced in the church of Christ the Saviour.

## A Church Infiltrated by the KGB and at its Mercy

Before the October revolution, the dominant concept in the relationship between Church and State was of a 'symphony', a legacy of the Russian Church's Byzantine heritage: Church and State were entitled to collaborate with each other for the sake of the country. Even more, in the Russian Empire whose motto was 'Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality', 'the laws of the Church (canon) and of the State (nomoi) were equally considered within a separate but unique legislation (nomocanonical)' (Rouleau 1991). However, at the beginning of the 20th century the Russian Orthodox Church did not anymore hide its need for a renewal, and the 'symphony' was put in question during the Council which started in 1917. But, almost as soon as the Bolsheviks came to power, the

Church was cruelly persecuted, and its evolution was interrupted. Most places of worship were closed, assigned to other activities, or else destroyed; priests and hierarchs were arrested, imprisoned and in some cases executed; believers were chased away; the Church and faith became objects of ridicule (Struve 1963: 45–46). All this was organised and orchestrated by the State, even though the Church had been officially separated from it since the decree of 23 January 1918 (Struve 1963: 320–321).

Furthermore, even though Patriarch Tikhon had sought to oppose the Bolsheviks, his successor Sergii (Stragorodskii), under duress and after a period of detention, published a statement made in the summer of 1927 in which he argued for the total submission of the Church to the Soviet State, making obedience to Soviet power a matter of religious morality: 'We want to be Orthodox and also recognise the Soviet Union as our civilian motherland, whose joys and successes are our joys and successes, and whose failures are our failures' (Struve 1963: 305–309). This declaration gave rise to 'Sergianism' (Russian: *sergianstvo*), the term used to designate the complete collaboration of the Church, but it failed to stop the persecutions which started up again in late 1927.

People aware of these historical facts were therefore inclined to smile bitterly on hearing the speeches of certain lawyers representing the plaintiffs in the Pussy Riot case, who regularly referred to the 'age-old tradition' of Orthodoxy in Russia, a tradition Pussy Riot were said to pose a threat to. Violetta Volkova ironically remarked: 'For centuries the Rus' maintained their Orthodox traditions and preserved the heritage of Sergius of Radonezh and of Tikhon. On 21 February 2012 three young women on the *soleya* of the church of Christ Saviour destroyed it all within 30 seconds' (Kostyuchenko 2012e). In fact, the hiatus of the Soviet years is little known or else denied by Pussy Riot's detractors, who do not seem to remember that the Russian Orthodox Church was almost wiped out in 1943 when Stalin granted it a renewed legal form of existence so as to use it for his own ends. A kind of Soviet 'symphony' started then, which some have called 'Stalin's religious NEP' (Bociurkiw 1969: 72), and the Patriarchate therefore ensured that nothing and no one would trouble its appeased relation with a power it was fully serving.

But oppression started up once again under Khrushchev and, in 1961 the State obliged the Church to adopt a new status, further increasing its dependence on those in political power, represented by the Council for Religious Affairs, a State body under KGB control. Furthermore the Church, like all social organisations, was increasingly infiltrated by the KGB (Albats 1995): in 1962 the head of the Second Directorate of the KGB (counterespionage) reported that over the previous two years the KGB had infiltrated 'reliable agents' into leading positions in the Moscow Patriarchate and other Churches and religious groups (Andrew and Mitrokhin 1999: 635).

The KGB continued to control the Church and its activities after Khrushchev disappeared from the political scene, even though the previous heavy-handed approach was generally dropped. Russian journalist Yevgeniya Albats, who has written an excellent book on the KGB, quotes Konstantin Kharchev, the former president of the Council for Religious Affairs: 'No clergyman could become a bishop, and even less a member of the Holy Synod, without the approval of Central Committee of the Communist Party and the KGB' (Albats 1995: 50–53). The recruitment of priests by the KGB accelerated even, and it sought to establish contact with all of them (Albats 1995: 50–53; Struve 1980: 9).

## The Early Dissidents and Solzhenitsyn

In the summer of 1965 Archbishop Ermogen of Kaluga and nine other bishops, probably unaware of the full consequences of what they were doing, protested to the Patriarchate against the increasing submission of the Church to the State. Patriarch Aleksii I responded by ordering Ermogen to withdraw to a monastery, and as the dissident priest Gleb Yakunin observed, this was the last attempt by bishops to 'officially protest against the relationship between Church and State' (Yakunin 1979: 21). Two young priests then decided to act. On 13 and 15 December 1965 Gleb Yakunin and Nikolai Echlman sent two letters, one 'to His Holiness the Patriarch of Moscow and all Russia', and the other to 'Comrade President of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR' (Iakounine and Echlman 1966). The letter to the Patriarch sought to prick consciences, and the tone was set by the very first lines: 'The Russian Church is seriously and dangerously ill, and its illness is due entirely to the fact that the Church authorities have failed to fulfil their duty, and have withdrawn beyond "limits that should not be transgressed"'. The letter to the authorities was far drier in tone and called into question the State's unceasing and 'illegal' interference in Church affairs. This is what Pussy Riot said, though admittedly in a different context. But on 13 May 1966 the Patriarch removed the two priests from their positions (Iakounine and Echlman 1966: 57), and as Solzhenitsyn (Solzhenitsyn 1981: 122) observed in 1972 'they were punished for telling the truth'. The fact that their initiative met with failure shows that neither the State nor the upper echelons of the Church hierarchy had any wish to modify the relationship that existed between them.

At around the same time lay people started to mobilise to defend the rights of Christians. More generally, at a time when the political authorities were doing everything in their power to curb religious practice, the Russian intelligentsia was gradually discovering orthodoxy even if only in the form of icons – and Yekaterina Samutsevich's father remarked for that matter that she had grown up in a family that had followed this pattern of development (Kostyuchenko 2012c). Solzhenitsyn was at the time one of the most admired writers because he had dared to describe the Gulag where he and millions of other people had been imprisoned. And he sent a letter to Patriarch Pimen during Great Lent in 1972 in which he clearly set out the moral dimension to the Church's compromises, framing the debate not in terms of a practical survival strategy but in those of Christian ethics:

What arguments can one find to convince oneself that the systematic destruction of the spirit and body of the Church under the direction of atheists is the best means to preserve it? Preserve it for whom? Evidently not for Christ. Preservation – but how? By lying? But after this lying who is to perform the Eucharist? (Solzhenitsyn 1981: 123)

This crucial question received no answer from the Patriarchate, but marked the beginning of a heated samizdat debate (for example, Zheludkov 1972), the 'samizdat' meaning the preparation and the circulation of writings not going through official censorship processes (the participants tape or photograph several copies of the texts they write or read, and want other people to know). Solzhenitsyn, who argued for the primacy of ethical choice, repeatedly affirmed that the individual has real power and true responsibility: 'We can do

everything! But we lie to ourselves for assurance', he observed in his 1974 article 'Live Not by Lies' (Solzhenitsyn 1981: 168).

There once again, though the form taken is undeniably very different, Pussy Riot also denounce the compromises made by the Church and their concomitant ethical consequences. They also provide an example of a rejection of lies and inaction born of and justified by a feeling that it is impossible to influence anything. In Alekhina's final declaration at her trial in August 2012, she declared she was not 'afraid of lies and sham, poorly decorated lies in the verdict' and, addressing the judge, stated the following, which is reminiscent of what Solzhenitsyn had said in the 1970s:

you only can deprive me of so called freedom. ... My inner freedom no one can take from me. It lives and will live on through the word, thanks to openness, when thousands of people will read it and hear. ... I believe that it's honesty and openness, thirst for truth which will make us a little freer. We will see this. (Alyokhina 2012; for Russian original, see Kostyuchenko 2012f)

For her part Tolokonnikova explicitly quoted Solzhenitsyn (for example, Tolokonnikova 2013), something which can surprise those in the West who have sought to reduce him to the simplistic figure of a conservative reactionary. The young woman, a philosophy student, observed at the end of her trial in August 2012:

Like Solzhenitsyn I believe that, in the end, words will crush concrete. Solzhenitsyn wrote, "the word is more sincere than concrete, so words are not trifles. Once noble people mobilize, their words will crush concrete." Katya, Masha and I are in jail but I don't consider that we've been defeated. Just as the dissidents weren't defeated. When they disappeared into psychiatric hospitals and prisons, they passed judgement on the country. (Tolokonnikova 2012a)

Perhaps just as Alekhina and Tolokonnikova 'passed judgement on the country' that sent them to jail.

## The 'Russian Religious Renaissance' of the 1970s

Following on from Solzhenitsyn other lay people in the 1970s denounced State control of the Church (for example, Shafarevich 1973), whilst a handful of priests continued to struggle against this state of affairs (Ellis 1986: 373–381). In August 1979 Gleb Yakunin denounced in a public report the total control exerted by the State over the Church, its infiltration by the KGB and the tacit acceptance of this by the religious hierarchy (Yakunin 1979). The response came swiftly. On 1 November 1979 Yakunin was arrested and then sentenced to five years in a prison camp and five years of internal exile. The history of the struggle for a Russian Orthodox Church that refuses to strike compromises with the State and KGB is full of arrests, trials and criminal sentences.

In parallel to this more and more people during the 1970s, and especially young people and the intelligentsia, continued to rediscover the Orthodox faith, both as a religion and as a pillar of Russian identity. This is sometimes called the 'Russian religious renaissance', which emerged in the 1960s and was partially crushed by repression in the early 1980s. Between 1975 and 1979 adult baptism increased by 50%, and by 25.6% between 1980 and 1984 (*Religii i tserkvi v SSSR* 1993: 143). The Church hierarchy played no part whatsoever in

this revival, firstly because it was viewed as being too mired in its relationships with those in power, and secondly because it no longer conveyed the form of religious discourse part of society was clamouring for. Lastly, for the youngsters and intellectuals who were rediscovering their faith, 'the spirit of orthodoxy and the struggle against communism were intricately bound up with one another' (*Pobeda i Porazhenie* 1993).

One of the clearest examples of this religious revival was the Christian Seminar which was set up in October 1974 in Moscow and Leningrad, before rapidly spreading to other towns around the USSR. Its members were young intellectuals, philosophers and artists, and they rejected the values of the dominant system, calling on people to 'not live by lies', and debating religion, philosophy, politics, art and religion (*Vol'noe Slovo. Christianskii seminar* 1981: 8–12; *Obshchina* 1978: 34–35) – and in this they were not very different from the members of *Voyna* and *Pussy Riot* today.

As part of the dynamic created by the Seminar, one movement in particular emerged in Leningrad. It identified itself as being feminist and Orthodox, and gravitated around the young philosopher Tat'yana Goricheva and the poet Tat'yana Mamonova. This movement, most but not all of whose members were believers, at first produced a samizdat journal, *Woman and Russia* (*Zhenshchina i Rossiya*), the only issue of which was brought out in Leningrad in September 1979, resonating strongly both in the USSR and abroad. The cover page indicated that it was intended to be 'for women and about women', but Mamonova considered the feminist movement to be 'an essential part' of the human rights movement ('*Raznye soobshcheniya*' 1979–1980). She also pointed out that women such as Tat'yana Velikanova, Elena Bonner, Arina Ginzburg, Tat'yana Osipova and Natal'ya Gorbanevskaya were playing an essential role in the latter (Goricheva 1981). It is indeed the case that women have played an important part in Russian dissidence in general, something which is widely recognised (Vaissié 1999, 2000, 2013).

The authors of *Woman and Russia* sought primarily to reveal the social problems confronting women 'in their family, at work, in hospitals, and in the maternity ward' and to 'publish artistic and polemical works by women' (*Redaktsiya al'manakha* 1980). They told of the bad conditions in which women gave birth or had abortions, what it meant to be a woman in a patriarchal society, how the role of men was changing in families, and the difficult fate reserved for single mothers. But Yuliya Voznesenskaya, a former political prisoner, also told the story of her transfer to a camp (Voznesenskaya 1980).

## Orthodox Feminists and References to the Virgin

These Christian feminists openly asserted their spiritual quest but they did not criticise the official religious institutions, from which they kept their distance. Goricheva explained in an article how the Virgin Mary had enabled her to find herself and God after a period of 'existential revolt' when 'everything was permitted'. Quoting Jung she admitted she had refused femininity, especially as the ideal Soviet personality was in her opinion 'pseudo-masculine'. She was profoundly moved by her encounter with the Virgin, said to be 'the perfect incarnation of humanity and woman', a feminine ideal, and 'full body divinisation' (Goricheva 1980). This celebration of the Madonna also provided a way

of escaping from materialism, the overly asserted official value in the USSR, of rediscovering a national and cultural identity which had been crushed by the Soviet authorities, and of underlining the value of each individual in a country which exterminated its citizens in their millions.

In February 1980 the supporters and people involved in *Woman and Russia* started preparing a new samizdat journal along the same lines, and to be called *Mariya* in homage to 'her who has saved the world' ('K zhenshchinam Rossii' 1981), and they also set up a discussion club with the same name. In this review they criticised the patriarchal nature of Soviet society and explored many daily problems not addressed in other samizdat channels, as well as publishing religious articles in addition to social political and literary texts.

If other dissidents regarded this feminist and Orthodox current with a degree of irony they never openly said as much. But the authorities reacted surprisingly quickly, and in the late 1970s Orthodox feminists and the Christian Seminar were subject to ferocious repression by the Leningrad KGB, of which Vladimir Putin was a member at the time. The people behind the Seminar were sentenced to years in prison camps, and the women in charge of *Woman and Russia* and *Mariya* were forced to emigrate for the most part, even though the group would appear to have continued operating for one or two years ('Iz pis'ma o Leningradskikh diskussiyakh kluba 'Mariya' kontsa 1980 g.' 1982), bringing out a few more issues of the journal, mainly in the West.

The Pussy Riot have never explicitly referred to the Soviet feminists of the late 1970s and early 1980s, but like them they combine feminist demands, challenges to the authorities and – in the church of Christ the Saviour at least – dialogue with the Virgin. Young women in balaclavas singing and dancing in a church – something which would appear to have more to do with the 'happenings' of the English-speaking world – can indeed upset certain people. And this is why even before her trial Tolokonnikova emphasised that they did not 'utter any insulting words towards the Church, the Christians, and the [sic] God' in the cathedral, whilst also admitting it had been an 'ethical mistake' to stage a 'political punk performance' there, since it could hurt some people, although the young women had 'no intentions to offend anyone' (Tolokonnikova 2012b). This was not a form of surrender, as subsequent events were to prove. She emphasised that the essential thing was the message and not the form, which may well have been in some way inadequate.

This is a point that philosopher Mikhail Yampol'skii has fully understood: the members of Pussy Riot were calling for the separation of the kingdom of God and the terrestrial kingdom, hence a church was a perfectly appropriate place for this prayer once you look at the meaning, rather than the form (Yampol'skij 2012). But looking at the meaning rather than the form is precisely what the court refused to do. It did not want to take into account the fact that these young women were asking political questions, and also a theological one: could a new 'symphony' be justified?

## The Revelations of 1991–1992

Times have certainly changed since the Brezhnev era. But whilst the number of openly Orthodox believers rose exponentially in the USSR after religious

practice was accepted and encouraged by the political authorities in 1988, the question of the Church's compromises with the authorities and infiltration by the KGB was not cleared up. There is no doubt that during the late Soviet period the Russian Orthodox Church was entirely infiltrated by collaborators of varying degrees of willingness and activity, from the slightest monastery all the way up to the Patriarchate. As Archbishop Chrysostom of Vilnius – the one whom barrister Violetta Volkova referred to – explained: 'It was impossible to act otherwise, for no ordination could be carried out at that time without the prior approval of the civil authorities' (*Service Orthodoxe de Presse* 1992b). And the degree of infiltration was proportional to the Church rank, as confirmed by Kharchev, who was president of the Council for Religious Affairs up until 1989: 'Was the Metropolitan of Kiev collaborating with the KGB? I think so. ... Otherwise he would not have managed to reach a position of leadership in the Russian Orthodox Church' ('Ego Blazhenstvo bez mitry i zhezla' 1991).

After the 1991 putsch information began to leak from the KGB archives about the names of some collaborators. And, since the archives were closed immediately afterwards, we have to rely on the articles published at that time. On 6 September 1991 the Russian parliament set up a commission authorised to examine the KGB archives and presided by Lev Ponomarev. At the same time the weekly journal *Argumenty i Fakty* published a recent declaration by Metropolitan Kirill of Smolensk and Kaliningrad, the current Patriarch Kirill: 'Quite a few people in the Church and central television have collaborated with KGB' ('Chekisti... v ryasakh' 1991). *Argumenty i Fakty* sought the opinion of Father Georgii Edelstein, who explained that the 'declaration by Monsignor Kirill is especially valuable as he runs the Church's Department of External Relations, which has been fully KGBised from the president all the way down to the doorman'. Father Edelstein added: 'It is still the case today that every other priest is a known or secret collaborator with the KGB'. And he went on, saying to the amazed journalist: 'Do you know where the KGB starts and our current-day Church finishes? The only difference is that one wears a cassocks and the other epaulettes' ('Chekisti... v ryasakh' 1991). As Pussy Riot was to sing, 'Black robe, golden epaulettes'...

For Father Edelstein there was only one way out of this situation: 'Tell the truth and repent for our lies' ('Chekisti... v ryasakh' 1991). But the Church was quick to defend itself, arguing that anyone who dared to speak of links between the Church and the KGB would be viewed as the Church's enemies ('Eshche raz o KGB v Tserkvi' 1991). In this way Patriarch Aleksii II ensured that any revelations about the past of hierarchs, rather than 'lancing the wound', would amount to a 'posthumous triumph' for the KGB (*Service Orthodoxe de Presse* 1992a).

Nevertheless the Ponomarev commission continued with its work and unearthed reports in the KGB files proving that very high-placed Church dignitaries had actively collaborated with the political police. Following on from this Gleb Yakunin, who was a member of the commission, published a list of the codenames the KGB had given to its agents in the Russian Orthodox Church. Other people then put forward names on the basis of various crosschecks, suggesting that Metropolitan Filaret, Metropolitan Yuvenalii and Metropolitan Pitirim were agents 'Antonov', 'Adamant' and 'Abbat' respectively (*Service Orthodoxe de Presse* 1992a). Other crosschecks established that Patriarch Aleksii II was 'Drozdov'. These hierarchs were agents entrusted with a mission by their KGB superiors, to whom they had to report (*Service Orthodoxe de Presse*

1992a). Perhaps they did not have any choice. But by 1992 they were free to speak out and explain the constraints that had weighed on them during that period. Yet this was something they never chose to do.

Furthermore, in February 1992 the commission was dissolved, according to Ponomarev at the request of the Patriarch and Yevgenii Primakov, the head of the Secret Services. It was thus in vain that Yakunin declared that the only way to prevent a return to a totalitarian regime was to lance the monstrous abscess. Zoya Krakhmal'nikova, who published the religious samizdat journal *Nadezhda*, for which she was arrested and sentenced in 1982, spoke for her part of a 'national ethical catastrophe':

The Patriarch, who as it turns out was an agent of the KGB, should repent not just in front of God. He should also repent in front of the Church as a whole. He should have done so at the moment when he was appointed Patriarch ... And everybody would have forgiven him! ('Gleb Yakunin prodolzhaet razoblachat' KGB' 1992; Nezhnyi 1992)

But he never did repent, and nor did any other Church dignitaries in Russia.

Furthermore, in February 1992 once again, author Dmitrii Bykov noted that 'the main problem facing current-day orthodoxy' was that it was becoming an 'ideology': 'There is not a single important event that can take place today without a prayer, without being blessed and sanctified. The Church and the State are becoming one once again' (*Service Orthodoxe de Presse* 1992a). Was it the renewal of the 'symphony' or did the Church remain blocked in the 'spirit of Sergianism', as asked then Dmitrii Shusharin, a journalist specialising in religious matters? For him, 'the essence of Sergianism lies not only in a submission to Soviet power, but in the desire to form a unit with whatever power, regardless of its origin'. And he added that 'several generations of priests and laity simply (could) not imagine that the Church may ... not aspire to a 'symphony' with power' ('Patriarkhiya i vlast' – novaya simfoniya?' 1992). A 'symphony' dangerously closed to 'Sergianism'. But a process was under way and continued to develop under Putin.

## Pussy Riot Return to an Earlier, Interrupted Line of Criticism

And so when in 2012 Pussy Riot staged their performance in the church of Christ the Saviour (which was dynamited in 1931 and transformed into a swimming pool, before an exact replica was rebuilt in the 1990s), they were in fact taking up and expressing in their own fashion the reproaches that had been levelled against the Russian Orthodox Church since at least 1965, and in concentrated form in 1991 and 1992.

These reproaches also plague many Russian Orthodox believers who dare not express them out of respect for the religious institution. Besides, the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR), created in emigration, accused ROC for many years of collaborating with an atheist power and denounced the persecutions of believers in the USSR. Since 1990, its bishops, not only invited the priests and believers in Russia to join them, but also criticised the Moscow Patriarchate for remaining bounded by Sergii (Stragorodskii)'s statement, this 'sacrilegious lie', and accused the Soviet hierarchs of having become 'servile

instruments in the hands of the oppressors of the Church' (Dupuy 1991). But, in 2007, to everyone's surprise, the ROCOR joined the Moscow Patriarchate and its critics stopped. Other Orthodox groups or sects, such as the Russian True Orthodox Church or the Mother of God Centre have kept on criticising the worldly entanglement of the 'Red Church', but they are far from being as important as the ROCOR.

Since 2009, the Russian Orthodox Church is headed by Patriarch Kirill who is reputedly a KGB agent (something that seems obvious given the position he held in the Church's Department of External Relations), and he seems to have been recruited in 1969 under the codename of 'Mikhailov' (*Service Orthodoxe de Presse* 1992a). The Russian State has been run since 1 January 2000 by a (former) officer of the KGB, an organisation which during the Soviet period persecuted believers, threatened priests and infiltrated the Church. The people who fought for the Church and for believers' rights from the 1960s through to the 1980s have never received the slightest official recognition from the State, even though it now claims to be so highly orthodox. Yakunin, who was sentenced to years in prison camp for his faith, was even relieved of his duties as a priest in December 1993 by the Moscow Patriarchate.

Furthermore, when in the early 1990s Russian society was desperately looking for answers to the identity questions it was asking itself, observers noted that the Church was unable to come up with any suggestions at all, having been spiritually paralysed by the years of oppression and compromise ('*Novye aspekty khristianskogo sotrudnichestva*' 1992). In 1993 Father Sergei Zheludkov, one of those who had answered Solzhenitsyn in 1972, bitterly deplored 'the inner poverty of the Russian Orthodox Church and its inability to live freely': 'It is not a question of old links between the hierarchs and the KGB or other such faults. What matters is something else – the Church simply has nothing to say about today's society, and that is even worse' (*Service Orthodoxe de Presse* 1992a). Are things all that different today?

Despite grandiose official discourse, Russian society is not one of church-goers, as a 2013 opinion poll shows. Although 64% of Russians say they are Orthodox, only 12% of these go to church at least once a month. Furthermore 52% of those who say they are Orthodox have never opened the Gospels or other religious texts, which only 15% of Orthodox believers read 'occasionally', and just 3%–5% 'constantly' (Dobrynina 2013). In an interview in January 2013 Tolokonnikova stated that she only kept two books at her bedside in the camp: the Bible and Berdyaev's *The Russian Idea* (Pussy Riot 2013), both of which were constantly read and debated by the young people of the Christian Seminar in the 1970s.

As Bykov foresaw in 1992, orthodoxy has now become a State ideology, although, according to the Russian Constitution of 1993, the Church and the State are separated. Vladimir Putin and Dmitrii Medvedev regularly and very publicly attend religious services, and Patriarch Kirill, who displays a surprising degree of material wealth for a monk, never misses an opportunity to make clear his support for Putin. During the winter of 2011–2012 he even went so far as to declare that 'Orthodox Christians do not go to demonstrations' (Dzyadko 2012), and called on them to vote Putin. Was it the expression of a renewed 'symphony', or, most likely, of assumed 'Sergianism'?

Father Edelstein does not mince his words: 'In the past the Bolsheviks dreamed of making priests the slaves of the Cheka. Nowadays the State has turned them

into its lackeys, having quite simply bought them all' (Svetova 2012). In his point of view, all the Soviet Patriarchs including Kirill have been 'Sergianists', and have been repeating Sergii (Stragorodskii)'s words of 1927 (*Lenta Novostei* 2014). Andrei Desnitskii, a Russian Bible specialist, also deplores this situation: 'Originally Sergianism was a compromise imposed on the Church, but it has gradually become a dangerous habit that they no longer pay any attention to' (posted on Facebook by Desnitskii, 28 August 2013). This is precisely what Pussy Riot were reacting against (Pussy Riot 2012a).

## Questions Left Unanswered by the Church

On 26 March 2012 the three young women wrote directly to Patriarch Kirill from their prison, and whilst the tone and form were highly respectful, they were forthright in their views. First of all they pointed out that 'a fervent and sincere prayer can never be a mockery, no matter what form it takes'. They added that they wanted to denounce the links between the Church and State and the fact that, like 'millions of Christians', they were 'seriously grieved' that the Patriarch had urged 'the faithful to vote for a man whose crimes are infinitely far from God's Truth': 'We simply cannot believe the representative of the Heavenly Father if he acts contrary to the values for which Christ was crucified on the cross' (Pussy Riot 2012b). The young prisoners were thus putting forward an idea very similar to that expressed by Solzhenitsyn in 1972: what moral legitimacy can the religious authorities have when they do not fulfil their spiritual mission?

And so Pussy Riot did not act out of 'religious hostility and hatred', and they did not 'express their religious hostility and hatred for ... Christianity', as the ruling issued against them on 17 August 2012 put it. This ruling – a curious mixture of religious and profane elements – declared that the young women were guilty of an 'act of vandalism' and blamed them for having 'illegally penetrated into that part of the church reserved for religious rites', whilst wearing clothes and masks which were 'from the point of view of the tenets of the Church obscene in such a place'. The ruling concedes that 'adhering to feminism is not a crime or an offence in the Russian Federation', but claims that 'religions such as Orthodoxy, Catholicism and Islam have a doctrinal basis which is incompatible with feminist ideas' ('Translyatsiya oglasheniya verdikta po delu Pussy Riot' 2012). It denies any political dimension to the Punk Prayer, stating that no political slogans were pronounced in the church and no reference was made to any politician.

The ruling does not even refer to the Patriarch. The questions asked of the Church thus went wholly unanswered, just as they had over the course of the previous decades. But they had been asked in such a way that, despite the Court's efforts, they have been brought back into the public arena, in Russia and not only there. Sooner or later, the Russian Orthodox Church will have to answer them. Furthermore, as stated in the Oriental Patriarchs' letter of 1848, the Truth in the Orthodox Church should be preserved by all believers, and not only by the clergy: this is the core of the concept of 'sobornost', a principle that, according to Father Edelstein, the Moscow Patriarchate does not respect, at any level (*Lenta Novostei* 2014).

On 5 August 2013, a little less than a year after the ruling against Pussy Riot, 75-year-old Father Pavel Adel'geim was assassinated in Pskov. His fate is sadly reminiscent of that of many Russians in the 20th century – his father had been shot in 1942 and in 1946 his mother was sentenced to detention and internal exile. He had become a priest in the 1960s, before being arrested in 1969 for distributing religious samizdat and sentenced to three years in a prison camp for 'defamation of the Soviet system'. From 1991 until his death Father Adel'geim had been an increasingly virulent critic of the Moscow Patriarchate, something which caused him numerous problems with his superiors. In an interview he gave in September 2012 he could not find words harsh enough to describe Patriarch Kirill, who in his eyes was 'the source of the Church's ills' and belonged 'to a clan of the Kremlin, who support him' (Svetova 2013b). Father Adel'geim had defended Pussy Riot, writing on his blog on 13 February 2013 that their action should not be considered 'as an isolated case, existing outside the life of the Church and society' (Adel'geim 2013).

In a letter he wrote shortly before being assassinated, he denounced 'the friendship between the Church and the State' as a 'catastrophe':

In Russia Faith in the Church is being replaced by ideology. There is no faith, but there is ideology. The Church has taken the place of the former CPUS's Politburo. That is what people call it today. It is said that Chekists run Russia. In fact it turns out that there is no longer any room for Christ in this Church. ('Obnarodovany poslednie slova ottsa Pavla o sud'be RPTs' 2013)

Pussy Riot said the same thing in other terms:

Patriarch Gundyaev believes in Putin,  
Bitch, better believe in God instead.

Father Adel'geim had been ordained by Archbishop Ermogen. There is a link there, just as there is a link – though based on different grounds – uniting Mariya Alëkhina and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova from Pussy Riot, the Pskov priest Pavel Adel'geim, Gleb Yakunin, Solzhenitsyn, the Leningrad feminists and others: all fervent believers that the Church should be independent of the State and the political police, and that it should defend individual freedoms.

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