

Pussy Riot

February 2, 2014

Traditional book publishing does not lend itself well to current events. However, the introduction of self and independent book publications, as well as the e-book, has vastly changed this landscape. Today, books can reach a wide audience almost immediately after they are written. A perfect example of this is Stephen Morgan's recent book, *Pussy Riot vs. Putin: Revolutionary Russia* that chronicles the events relating to the arrest, trial, and sentencing of the Russian feminist punk rock band Pussy Riot in Moscow last year.

On February 21, 2012, five members of the band Pussy Riot, wearing brightly colored balaclavas, walked into the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow and sang a protest "prayer" entitled "Virgin Mary, Put Putin Away." Their actions were aimed at Orthodox Church leaders' unabashed support for President Vladimir Putin's anti-democratic policies in Russia. Morgan writes that the band "wanted to give artistic expression to how outraged they were at Putin," and to highlight that the relationship between Putin and Church leaders, which Putin leverages to serve his own political needs, is unconstitutional in a secular state (20-21). The "punk prayer," which did not include musical accompaniment, lasted forty seconds before the members of Pussy Riot were removed by church security. Three members of the band were later arrested by the police and charged with "hooliganism motivated by religious hatred." Morgan describes the events that followed as akin to Stalin's "Moscow Show Trials." Two of the band members were convicted and sentenced to "the harshest [labor] camps of all possible choices" (43). Emphatically written, *Pussy Riot vs. Putin* expresses both Morgan's passion for the band's mission and in-depth knowledge of the events surrounding Pussy Riot's arrest, trial, and what Morgan would argue was their foregone conviction.

Pussy Riot vs. Putin is a short book divided into three sections. Part I, "From Streets to Cells," comprising more than half of the book, recounts the events surrounding Pussy Riot that took place from February 2012 through December 2012. The first chapter of this section immediately engages the reader by humanizing the arrested members of the group—Maria, 24; Nadezhda (Nadia), 22; and Yekaterina, 30. They are students of philosophy, journalism, and creative writing; they are interested in the arts, theater, and photography; they have done volunteer work for Greenpeace and Children's Hospital in Moscow; and two of them, Maria and Nadia, have young children of their own. In providing this background information, Morgan conveys to the reader just what is at stake for these young women who have bright futures and families of their own. Despite what they have to lose, they have dedicated themselves to "rebell[ing] against the corruption, authoritarianism, and gluttony of Putin and his elite" (14). "Direct Action," as the title of the first chapter suggests, is the means by which Pussy Riot engages in their punk rock protests, performing in metro stations, on roofs of trams, and outside prison walls. They have even invaded fashion shows and occupied high-class boutiques. "[T]hey mean to break law on purpose, rather than submit to the regime's strict rules on registering for protests" (15). According to band members, the reason for their tactic is simple, "'As far as we can see, Putin is scared only of unsanctioned rallies'" (89). Fed up with sanctioned protests that are largely ignored by the authorities, Pussy Riot's outrageous performances have included discharging fire extinguishers, igniting smoke bombs, and simulating masturbation. Morgan illustrates Pussy Riot's political and feminist positions through the lyrics to their songs published in the first chapter, and shows convincingly how the song "Virgin Mary, Put Putin Away" was directed at Putin and Church leaders, and never actually attacked the believers in religion or the Church itself, the crime they were charged with.

In Chapter 2, "The Show Trial," Morgan clearly demonstrates not only how the charge levied against Pussy Riot was absurd, but that the verdict had been pre-determined even before the trial began. He

reports that the charge of “hooliganism motivated by religious hatred” was rejected by SOVA, a Russian NGO specializing in human rights violations, including religious issues, which stated that the criminal charges were illegitimate as they “did not see in the actions of the punk prayer’s participants any demonstration of religious hatred” (29). In addition, Morgan provides several examples in this chapter of how the judge in the case acted with egregious partiality against the defense, and how witnesses were coaxed into their testimonies by both the prosecuting attorneys and the secret service. Morgan asserts that this charade of a trial and the complete disregard for due process and the rule of law made it clear that this trial was under direct state control. In other words, Putin himself was pulling the strings behind the scene.

Although the evidence in this chapter is abundant and compelling, perhaps the most interesting point Morgan includes is the role feminism played in the trial and conviction of Pussy Riot. After exhausting the political motivations for Pussy Riot’s protest the judge suggested that the band’s feminist beliefs were to blame because they were antithetical to the Church, and were asserting the superiority of one ideology. Morgan writes that the judges’ actions would have us believe that feminism is an “immoral ideology based on hate...in effect criminalizing feminist activity” and further argues that Pussy Riot’s trial “is also an attack on feminist movements and women in general” (37). As Morgan further suggests, the trial in effect separates feminism from politics, relegating feminism to just another ideology rather than a political movement focused on equal rights and representation. This is not surprising given the human rights abuses in Russia, particularly against women and the LGBT community.

In the end, two members of Pussy Riot were convicted and sentenced to two years imprisonment. Chapter 3, “Condemned to Labor Camps,” briefly demonstrates that the partiality and bias against Pussy Riot that was shown in the trial did not abate once they were remanded to prison colonies. Maria was forced to defend herself against harsh provocations by inmates as well as prison guards “with the clear intention of provoking an incident, which might cause a reprimand and undermine her appeal” (47). On the other hand, Nadia was left alone. Morgan suggests this was to forestall any accusation of misconduct on the part of the state. This implies that even in prison the fates of these young women were under Putin’s direct control. This also raises the question, as Morgan proposes at the outset of this book, of why would Putin, a world leader with military and economic might, decide to throw his weight behind the conviction and imprisonment of a few members of a female punk band? Perhaps the answer can be found by harkening back to the judges’ scathing conviction of feminism in Chapter 3. In a country where left-wing opposition is bubbling under the surface, and a president with a dictatorial style is trying to remain in power, there may be no better group in the opposition to make an example of than one that is young and female.

The next chapter in the book, “Lies, Slander and Insinuations,” is largely dedicated to debunking the myth that Pussy Riot is backed by the CIA in an attempt to overthrow Putin and his regime. While most of the evidence presented in this chapter is Morgan’s own opinion, it is compelling nonetheless. As Morgan explains: “I don’t think ...the overthrow of global capitalism is something the CIA would invest in” (68). The next two chapters focus on the ideals, influences, and historical inspirations behind Pussy Riot that range from Sylvia Pankhurst and other “Western” feminists to anarchism to Karl Marx to Slavoj Zizek to the 1980s punk scene. However, there are many influences that situate Pussy Riot as a distinctly Russian group; Morgan loosely likens Pussy Riot’s experience in Russia to that of Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, the Decembrist revolt, Russian artist rebellions, the Futurists, and on and on to the present day.

The last section of the book, Part III: “Putinism” finally takes on the politics of Russia. However, only 28 pages in length—inclusive of Chapter 7: “The Power Vertical and the Drift towards Dictatorship” and Chapter 8: “What Now for the Opposition?”—this section is very brief in content and short on analysis. This is perhaps both the strength and weakness of the book. Stephen Morgan’s *Pussy Riot*

vs. Putin is not an academic book. At best it is journalistic in style and lacks both in-depth context and history. The perspectives presented in this book are entirely Morgan's. Under no circumstance is Morgan trying to introduce the world to a new academic concept or term, nor is he trying to implement some grand narrative to explain some missed connection in the conventional wisdom that explains the actions of either Pussy Riot or Vladimir Putin. This is just the facts, which arguably is the book's strength. The first part, which explains the protest, arrest, trial, and conviction of Pussy Riot, is excellent for both those who are familiar and those unfamiliar with the trial. However, the remainder of the book, while introducing the reader to some very interesting ideas and connections, barely stays on any one topic for more than a few paragraphs to cover anything in depth. This presents the problem that if you were even peripherally aware of Pussy Riot's trial and its relationship to contemporary Russian politics what you would get out of this book would be limited. However, if you knew nothing, this book would leave you wanting to know much more. In this sense *Pussy Riot vs. Putin* makes a good primer, especially for classroom use where one might want to gently ease students into concepts such as communism, totalitarianism, dictatorship, democracy, feminism, anti-authoritarianism, and left-wing opposition and their meaning in action.