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Flowers, Champagne, and Riots

Russian Feminism and its Complicated Relationship to the West

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Abstract

Russia is plagued by an epidemic of domestic violence as a result of convicted criminals returning home to Russia as free citizens after serving the Russian army for six months. At the same time, Western media outlets are celebrating Russian émigré activists, who were forced to leave their country to further protest the authoritarian regime under Vladimir Putin. Although the continued protest is necessary from abroad, who is left to fight for the victims of the rising numbers of violence in Russia? Though they are not noticeably present in Western media, there are feminist organisations and establishments set in Russian cities, that are involving themselves with the very core of Russia's problem: the fragile masculinity of Russian men.

Key words: domestic violence, feminism, protest biographies

Sammendrag

Som et resultat av hjemkomsten til dømte kriminelle, etter å ha tjenestegjort den russiske hæren i seks måneder, møter Russland en epidemi av økende tilfeller av vold i hjemmet. Samtidig feirer vestlig media russiske aktivister, som ble tvunget til å forlate hjemlandet sitt for å fortsette protesten mot det autoritære regimet under Vladimir Putin. Enda den fortsatte protesten er nødvendig, hvem står så igjen for å kjempe for ofrene i den stadig økende volden i Russland? Enda de ikke er sentrale i vestlig media, finnes det organisasjoner og stiftelser i russiske byer som involverer seg med roten i Russlands problem: den sårbare maskuliniteten til russiske menn.

Nøkkelord: vold i hjemmet, feminisme, protestbiografier

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Chapter One

1.0 Introduction

The decriminalization of domestic violence in 2017 predicted a dark future for Russian women. Although years has passed and protests were held, the law stands firm as ever since 2017. This sparked an outrage across the mass media in the West, understandably so, as the headlines painted a disturbing picture of Russia. For this terrible culture to be decriminalized, there must be a reason. Could it be in the name of equality? According to TASS, equality played a part in this, as claims has been made that the domestic violence law was too invasive in the upbringing of children. Spanking a misbehaving child could lead to a prison sentence, whereas a stranger beating a child would only end with an administrative penalty.

To be fair, the decriminalization was debated in the article "Ударить нельзя судить: мнения за и против декриминализации семейных побоев" (Hitting cannot be punished, opinions for and against the decriminalization of domestic violence). The debate gave voices to human rights activist and head of Anti-violence Center *Nasiliu.net* (No to Violence), Anna Rivina, and human rights activist of the *Ivan-chai Centre,* Anna Kislichenko and specialist in civil and international Marija Yarmysh, who were both against the decriminalization. The arguments against the decriminalization put emphasis on how the change of laws would become a threat to Russian women, as Rivina put it; "when we say that domestic violence is not a crime, we are thereby allowing the return of stereotypes: "battering means to love", "a woman needs to be corrected if she gets too cocky", and in general "it is her own fault".[1]

The fact that such a law could reappear in a Russia seeking to modernize, raises many questions, however. In the ensuing discourse, the authors went into detail, and noted that the article exclusively discuss acts that does not cause harm to health, for example a slap on the head, repeated force will lead to arrest.[2] Subsequently, they held that this article was simply a public debate, giving both parties a chance to argue and defend the controversial law suggestion, which is now decriminalized. The reality is less simple, however; it is darker and terrifying, and paints the words of those who agreed with the decriminalization in a muddy shade. This reality might not reach the masses of Western media, as the interest has moved onto other areas of geopolitics,

[1] "Ударить нельзя судить: мнения за и против декриминализации семейных побоев", *ТАСС*, January 27, 2017, https://tass.ru/obschestvo/3971405.
[2] Ibid.

but in the years following the decriminalization, women have died at the hands of their boyfriends and husbands.

Luckily, some were able to escape fatal attacks by men and were able to report incidents to the police. Two survivors of graphic domestic abuse stand out: Margarita Gracheva, whose husband cut off her arm as she informed him that she would file for divorce, which inspired another violent husband who promised to do the same to "Anastasia", whose identity is hidden. "Anastasia" was tortured for three weeks (which their child witnessed) until her husband drove them to the hospital. Both cases are extremely violent, and "Anastasia" is certain that her ex-husband is determined to find her when he gets out, which is why her identity is hidden and is forced to move away from their hometown Perm.[3] Gracheva's ex-husband is currently serving a sentence of 14 years in a maximum-security colony. Although Gracheva received freedom from the tyranny of her ex-husband, she contacted the police several times to report her ex-husband. It was only after the scandalous and brutal attack in 2017, that the police took action to help her. She has now appealed to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), which found Russia guilty of violating the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, and addressing Russia's lack of concern for "family violence", as it is not considered a reason for intervention of law enforcement. Further, the ECHR has ordered Russia to pay Gracheva 370,000 euros.[4]

Although these two cases gained significant attention, partly due to the shocking brutality they suffered, most cases of domestic violence go unnoticed. *Nasiliu.net* reports that 24 percent of Russians have experienced domestic violence within their own family, and that 79 percent of women convicted of premeditated murder acted out of self-defence from domestic violence.[5] The percentages of Russians who have expired domestic violence is difficult to measure, as victims are traumatised and scared to report the abuse. Yet the percentage of convicted murderers who acted out of self-defence speaks volumes, as a violence can sometimes seem like the only possible action, when the local police and Russia's law protects the abuser rather than the victim. As the violence is allowed to continue, despite reports of brutal attacks on women, other issues regarding women's rights in Russia falls under the radar, making a societal debate regarding issues such as sexual harassment, reproductive rights, LGBTQ-rights, and

[3] Viktor Pravdin, "Обрил наголо, отрубил руку и бросил умирать: в Прикамье повторилась жуткая история москвички Риты Грачевой", *Комсомолская Правда,* August 30, 2023, https://www.perm.kp.ru/daily/27548/4815709/.
[4] "Россиянин обрил наголо жену и отрубил ей руку", *Lenta.ru,* August 31, 2023, https://lenta.ru/news/2023/08/31/nasilsem/.
[5] Nasliliu.net, "Статистика домашнего насилия в России и в мире", https://nasiliu.net/pronasilie/statistika-domashnego-nasiliya-v-rossii-i-v-mire/.

general misogyny, difficult. These issues seem marginal and lucid, compared to an epidemic of gendered violence. Due to this foundation, this thesis is committed to question how gendered violence and vile sexist remarks, concealed by playful banter, prevents Russia from implementing feminist values to its culture and legal framework.

1.1 Research question and thesis aim

The revised law on domestic violence is but one factor that speaks volumes about the changed conditions for women in Putin's Russia. While 'feminism' as such alludes to something like an imported article in the context framed by Putinism, decades of modernisation has also brought about domestic feminist movements, and movement entrepreneurs, with strong protest biographies. The research questions shaping this thesis addresses the domestic forms of feminist protests in Russia, the context, and references of such protests, and finally, how women understand their role as women in times of war.

A first research question guiding the discussion is 'how do protest biographies contribute to domestic forms of Russian feminism', in which ways this strand of feminist thinking and activity is converging on certain 'Russian' particularities, and how is feminism framed by these protesters. A derived research question is 'has the war altered conceptions of feminism in any substantial way?'

I ask these questions with the purpose of discovering what feminism means to Russian women, as my perception before starting this project was quite limited and the topic intrigued me.

An MA thesis is born out of inquiry and experience. The history of the USSR sparked an interest in me at a young age, mostly due to the promise of equal rights and a classless society. Through this interest, the question regarding feminism rose as the history on a surface level made it seem as if Soviet women enjoyed equal rights with Soviet men. A deeper dive into history reveals, however, that this simplification of Soviet women and their place in society is underpinned and sustained merely by a lack of interest by those specialising in Soviet history, as a very small part of history books are dedicated to women's history.

This lack of interest is not limited to historians of the USSR, though it is problematic that women are not given a fair space in history books. This does not concern all history books regarding the USSR, however, the narrative of a classless utopia, where the criticism rests upon the long lines outside stores, the iron curtain and genocide, one would think the criticism also

shed light on the inequality of the genders. Most history books provide a tiny subchapter to women and their contribution to society of the period they existed within. I emphasise that the small space women are granted are in history books which covers centuries worth of history. Although general history books cannot focus every aspect of history on women, it is noteworthy that women's contribution is heavily downplayed. In the past decade, however, a significant historian entered popularised history literature; Svetlana Alexievich, whose research not only includes women, but certain books are dedicated solely to women's contribution in history. Namely *War's Unwomanly Face,* which is based on interviews with female soldiers, who fought for the Red Army during the Second World War and how it affected them personally.

While there has been an increase in literature on the topic of feminism and women's rights from the 1990s and onwards, pressures from the 'conservative turn' under Putin and the war in Ukraine may overshadow the gains from this research, and possibly also severe the situation for women inside Russia. At the time of writing, women suffer under the patriarchal, authoritarian rule of President Vladimir Putin, and at the same time, Russia is at war. Paradoxically, men suffer in a more literal sense, as they are human shields, obligated to fight a war they do not understand, and ever larger cycles of mobilization may repeat patterns in Soviet history of women becoming ever more important for all the wrong reasons. Although it is true that war has deadlier consequences for men as the army is made up of their bodies, this does not make it less true that the women of any given time of history do not suffer. Although my aim for this thesis is not to minimize the pain and fear of Russian men, I seek to push the focus over to Russian women, who are currently living in a country, which laws do not protect themm and the opportunities to leave seem more and more narrow.

I maintain that the factors that shape Russian feminism, are those outlined in the literature of social movements. This does not imply that feminism is a social movement as such, but that protest biographies, culture and context are of primary importance to understand the phenomenon at hand. As James Jasper holds, "cognitive liberation depends on cultural processes, some of which may be independent of strategies and political structures".[6] In other words, whereas the political context is not permissive to women's rights, written works, political stage performances, and protest biographies can still tell us a lot about the inner structure of feminist thinking and agency.

[6] James M. Jasper, *The Art of Moral Protest: Culture, Biography, and Creativity in Social Movements,* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 37.

The second aim of this thesis is to question Western feminism as a concept and why it is considered as the normative perception of feminism. For an idea or a movement to adapt to a society, history and culture needs to join the context. Thus, I will also consider that Soviet history is vastly different from Western European history[7] due to decades of political and physical isolation. When women in the USA were protesting for their right to reproductive rights, the Soviet system cultivated a different style of women's rights.

1.1. Thesis outline

This thesis is divided into eight chapters, where each chapter contains specific topics which discusses different aspects of feminism. *Chapter 2* introduces the theories this thesis is based on, primarily the theories of James M. Jasper, Martin Nila, bell hooks, Valerie Sperling and Rebecca Solnit. The choice of these Western feminist writers is deliberate, as they clearly represent the philosophy developed in Western society. These protest biographies create serve as a reference point for a larger comparative quest: does Russia need this specific kind of feminism, or have Russian protesters adopted their own versions; versions that are created independently from Western theories and historic significance?

In *Chapter 3*, I present the methodology I used to approach my fieldwork and discuss the qualitative method and usage of in-depth interviews and case studies through memoirs and fiction, and social media presence. I am mindful of all the challenges of interviewing respondents in times of war and conflict, and with the limitations of not being able to conduct face-to-face interviewing.

Chapter 4 goes back in time to emphasise the importance of history to understand the development of feminism as a modern concept. It explains the reality of the Soviet era of Russia's history with a focus on women's rights and experiences. However, as the USSR existed for seven decades, I am unable to elaborate on the progress of women's rights through each decade. For this reason, I dedicate attention to the very start of the USSR and how the promise of equality fell short and how the shortcomings of revolutionary men affects contemporary Russian society and culture.

[7] The usage of the term «West» is limited to the culture, politics and society of Western Europe, the USA, Canada, and Australia in the context of this thesis.

In *Chapter 5,* I build on the findings in *Chapter 4,* as it is deeply related to how Russian society was influenced by the return of Christian Orthodoxy and the church's affiliation with the Russian government. The celebration of the International Women's Day is a vital to understand how Russia separates itself from the West through a commemoration meant to remember women who fought for the rights we are currently enjoying and a reminder to carry on, yet Russians remember the day with gifts and putting women on a pedestal for a day. This chapter also contains an analysis of the personality cult surrounding the macho image of Putin and how this affects Russian women and men in different ways.

Chapter 6 is dedicated to the case studies of female activists in Russia who are now living on unknown addresses outside their home country; this section underlines the significance of agency and protest biographies, as vessels of a specific cultural post-Soviet feminism. Pussy Riot members Nadya Tolokonnikova and Masha Alyokhina, and Press Secretary of Navalny, Kira Yarmysh are all notable women, who have exposed new ideas in a hostile context. These three women are all former inmates of the Russian punitive system, who all wrote books based on their experiences of being imprisoned for protesting and the prison experience itself. Through their literature, I analyse the feminist aspects as part of the methodology of this thesis to further answer my research questions.

Chapter 7 incorporates respondent data from interviews I conducted at the end of 2022. These interviews have been very valuable to my research question, as the respondents are all Russian women who gave interesting input on my research question. Finally, the eight chapter will summarize the thesis and conclude this thesis.

Chapter Two

2.0 Theoretical Framework

Social movements such as feminism, require protest, which the Western countries has seen on a large scale for decades. After centuries of being perceived as second-class citizens, white women[8] in Great Britain fought for their right to vote. These protesters were called the Suffragettes, founded by activist Emmeline Pankhurst, which organisation marked a shift of women claiming a space within a misogynistic culture which was doing their best to silence them. Their protest was creative and brutal, which the culture of Great Britain required for the protest to have any affect. The motto of Pankhurst hammered "Deeds, not words!", calling for actions due to women's frustration of how slow the progression of women being able to vote.[9]

Pankhurst and her organisation *Women's Social and Political Union* (WSPU) are especially famous for their militant protest methods for their time, such as breaking windows, setting fire to mailboxes and vandalising bowling halls, racetracks, and other spaces where powerful men used to meet at the time. These methods were mild in comparison to their further frustration, as they started to use bombs to echo their cause/demand. On February 19, 1913, the suffragettes bombed the uninhabited villa of finance minister David Lloyd George after he had failed to fulfil his promise of support the fight for women's right to vote in the Parliament Election. Pankhurst took the blame for this attack and was sentenced to three years in prison, where she went on a hunger strike. Historians disagree on the significance of Pankhurst's efforts in the women's rights movement, it is however noteworthy that her activism raised the voices of British women and is considered crucial for white women over 30 years old receiving the right to vote in 1918.[10]

The usage of bombs is inherently violent, yet these violent protest methods were necessary to frame a topical concern. As men were withholding women's right to vote, the rights were not a given; voting rights were granted only after women fought for it with political tools, in addition to violent methods to attract attention from those who did not perceive them as equals. The right to vote was however a victory and a step towards full political equality between both genders.

[8] I emphasise white women in this context as women of colour were still an oppressed group even though their white peers received their right to vote in this period. The emphasis on white women correlates to that of a "Western" narrative, who throughout history has considered themselves the standard in relation to "others".
[9] Anne Synnøve Simensen, *Emmeline Pankhurts* in *Store Norske Leksikon (SNL),* May 22, 2023, https://snl.no/Emmeline_Pankhurst.
[10] Anne Synnøve Simensen, *Emmeline Pankhurts* in *Store Norske Leksikon (SNL),* May 22, 2023, https://snl.no/Emmeline_Pankhurst.

The fight of the suffragettes suggests that the connection between social norms and political realities is a vicious cycle, as those in power wish to stay in power, and those who benefit from the social norms, wish to keep their privileged positions within a given society. At the same time, as observed by Jasper, in the specific context of women's rights, emotions such as anger and frustration has been embedded in female protests, not only as an 'expression', but as a *legitimate* expression of grievances.[11]

In contemporary Russia, political legitimacy is heavily gendered, and emotively flat. The Kremlin frames masculinity as a model of comfort for Russian men, well-situated within the patriarchal society, and masculinity is used in a targeted manner to underpin a sense of comfort and stability. Hence, it is a tool for the current authoritarian president to hold on to his political legitimacy.[12] Due to this cycle, those in power are comfortably governing a society of Russian men and women who are accepting of the *status quo*. Those who oppose to the *status quo* favouring men over women, such as feminists-activists, pose a threat to the current government, but they are however a minority as the social norms regarding gender are very ingrained and difficult to change. Because of these circumstances, feminist activists in contemporary Russia tend to ridicule and over-exaggerate social norms as a theme in their artistic methods of protest. This is, however, a mode of protest inspired by Pankhurst herself. This will become clear in *Chapter 6,* where I analyse the protest method and philosophy of Pussy Riot, whose founder was heavily inspired by Pankhurst.

Although Pussy Riot's protests are not physically violent, their protest involves civil disobedience as means to attract an audience. For example, in 2018, members of the group ambushed a football game under the FIFA World Cup, which took place in Moscow. The members were dressed in white shirts and black ties, symbolising the "heavenly policeman", which is based on Dimitri Prigov's image of a policeman; one who follows the rule of the game, a contrast to the "earthly policeman" who enters the game, not caring about the rules. As the group was already famous worldwide for their performance in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in 2012 (which I will elaborate on in *Chapter 6),* they predicted that the stunt would attract attention, both in Russia and by foreign media. Therefore, they had a list of political demands published shortly after the football-stunt; releasing political prisoners, allowing political competition in the country, and ending false criminal accusations to keep people

[11] James M. Jasper, *The Art of Moral Protest,* 186.
[12], Valerie Sperling, *Sex, Politics, and Putin: Political Legitimacy in Russia,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), https://readingservices.kobo.com/ReadNow/f8ddcc49-087d-4161-ae3b-e7ec9104dca1?utm_content=cover, 26.

imprisoned.[13] The following subchapter goes in depth on how I will utilise a theoretical framework to analyse movements such as Pussy Riot and other individuals and organisations while I also question their framing of feminism Western interference.

2.1 Protest theory

Due to the importance of protest and protest biographies in this thesis, my theoretical approach draws on James M. Jasper's *The Art of Moral Protest: Culture, Biography, and Creativity in Social Movements* to analyse the protest of feminist activism in Russia. His chapter *Basic Dimensions of Protest* depicts four dimensions of protest: (1) resources, (2) strategies, (3) culture, and (4) biography, all of which affect each other. Resources are physical technologies or the money to purchase them, strategies are choices made by individuals in their interaction with other individuals, or with individuals of opposing views, culture is shared understandings and their embodiments, and biography is individual constellations of cultural meanings- such as personality, sense of self, based on personal experiences.[14] These dimensions intertwine, as biography affects strategy; whether a leader or king flees, attacks or surrender in the face of a crowd, depends on personality traits and idiosyncratic emotional response in the crowd.

The strategic choices made by activists also rely heavily on available resources, yet culture and biography can compensate for the lack of material resources, also in so far as innovation and display of personality generate income. The outcome of past interactions and expectations of future interactions are the core of protest, which is why the meanings of culture and biography is inherently important, otherwise strategy is simply a conflict, leading the protesters blind to violence and traps from their oppositions.[15] Although frame resonance, that is, the attraction of followers, is dependent on resources, which is true in many cases, stranger things have happened. Those with less have torn down large and wealthy institutions, and protest displays can live on in lacunas in society, also under conditions of authoritarian rule. Strategy must blend with resources, as well as culture and biography to create something mentally digestible, rather than a Molotov cocktail, in other words; chaos.[16]

[13] Ivan Nechepurenko and Melissa Gomez, «Pussy Riot Members Detained After Running Onto Field at World Cup Final, Police Say», *New York Times*, July 15, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/15/sports/soccer/pussy-riot-world-cup-final.html.
[14] James M. Jasper, *The Art of Moral Protest*, 44.
[15] Ibid., 46.
[16] Ibid., 46-48.

Culture is essential to protest, as it shapes the society in which the protest takes place. Jasper writes that strategizing is sometimes a matter of following the rules of the set culture, while other times breaking these rules are a protest.[17] Although culture shapes the actions of individuals, it is also a reservoir for frames and symbols, that cannot be understood outside of the given context. Culture is, on the one hand, a bond, or an agreement between the individuals in a given cultural setting, also regarding the morals and rules, or the does and don'ts of societal behaviour. Moreover, the thoughts, references, and frames that protesters share with others are also cultural artifacts, while the thoughts they express when framing their own protest biography are more personal and biographical.[18]

This does not imply, however, that protest biography is irrelevant. Activists shape their biographies through action, and Jasper's four dimensions of protest is a wonderful tool to better understand the strategies of protests. He emphasises that one must not assume that structures, social networks, and formal organizations are permanent. This could for instance mean that strategies must change due to how repetitiveness can lead to predictability, or they need to change due to lack of resources. Biography changes as well, as each individual lead unique lives which affects their needs, yet culture also change the needs and resources these individuals have access to, causing change in the needs and capacity of biography throughout history.[19]

In this thesis, I shall assume that the four dimensions are helpful in their own way, yet art and performance is what draws them together. Protesters use existing traditions and references, but experiment with alternatives for the future.[20] After all, one protest for change, be it a small communal issue the local community is unhappy with, or a larger issues, such as those this thesis digs into, is an impact; issues regarding women's rights in a society, which has been rebranding itself as a patriarchal society after seventy-four years of partial isolation from the rest of the world, is a potent field for the adoption of strategies, and also a performative lessons learned from the past.

The theory of protest is useful for my analysis of feminist establishments in Russia in *Chapter 5,* where Russian, feminist activists challenges the political legitimacy of Putin, the Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and the war on Ukraine. It is also useful in *Chapter 6,* where I analyse the protest biographies and methods of Pussy Riot and Kira Yarmysh, who used the existing culture in which they lived to find clever ways of protesting the current

[17] Jasper, *The Art of Moral Protest*, 52.
[18] Ibid., 54.
[19] Ibid., 64.
[20] Ibid., 65.

government under President Vladimir Putin. While the cultural context for my cases is specific, feminism as a movement is inherently a protest against all social contexts, where patriarchy is the norm. In other words, a society in which men hold the power over women's rights.[21] The ongoing protest for women's rights is global, though is more often than not compared to Western societies and politics, as they historically hold the blueprint for what "modern" feminism should be. This is problematic, as the comparison fails to include context in the discussion. Feminist efforts have been unsuccessful in the past due to this ignorant and dehumanizing mentality, even Russian revolutionary women walked into the movement with the same issue, as they failed to take culture into consideration. The revolutionary Alexandra Kollontai and the *Zhenotdel* (women's department of the Central Committee of the All-Russian Communist Party) used their own cultural framing to awaken a feminist movement in "the East". They failed to consider the biographies and culture of the women they tried to influence. As "the veil" symbolised the isolation and oppression of the non-Western, religious women faced in the Caucasus, Volga and Central-Asia, the revolutionary women of the *Zhenotdel* took it upon themselves to encourage "unveiling". They connected the cultural clothing to religion and oppression, failing to take into consideration that the fabrics these non-Western women bore, was culturally linked. Other than that, the revolutionary women also failed to predict the consequences of their encouragement, as the male counterparts of the vailed women responded to the unveiling with violence.[22] Although the minds behind the 'unveiling' in reality were men,[23] the fact stands that the lack of consideration of other cultures when attempting to implement one's own ideals and values is arrogant, regardless of how good the intentions are. This is very much the case in contemporary Russia, where the modern concept of feminism has been developed through a Western culture and is slowly approaching Russia.

2.2 A dominant West?

The Russian conservative turn is a publicly supported value system, that seeks to distance Russia from Western values. This raises a difficult research problem. On the one hand, it is of course understandable that human rights activists visiting Russia compare their host country to their own culture and customs. However, what is unnatural, is to assume that what took

[21] bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre*, (*Preface to the second edition)*, (London: Pluto Press, 2000), 11.
[22] Richard Stites, "Bolshevism and Russian Women, 1917-1930", *Russian History* 3, no.2 (1976): 174-193, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24649711, 180.
[23] I will return to this in 4.2.

Pankhurst and her successors decades to achieve in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth century, is achievable in contemporary Russia. On the other hand, as the government is decriminalizing domestic violence, Russia is regressing in terms of human rights standards. So, while it is rather pointless to compare the suffragettes to contemporary women, the suffragettes have served as a frame for mobilization, and has been used as an example of extreme feminist activism using force to deliver their arguments for their cause. In this context, and also, in the context of war and increasing domestiv violence, the reference is highly relevant in the contexts of Russia, especially after Ukraine was invaded by Russian forces in 2022.

It should also be mentioned that Soviet women fought for the same cause as the suffragettes, yet the motives of their male supporters and themselves was rooted in socialism, not solely on women's liberation. This is a paradox. Contemporary women in Russia have the right to vote, but socialist women achieved it even before Great Britain in 1917. Their fight differed greatly and is not comparable, due to the socialist motives, but also because of USSR's isolation from Western influence, which affected how much of the development and waves of feminism Soviet women got to participate in. For this reason, a straightforward comparison between the achievements in the West regarding liberation from domestic labour and sexual suppression to that of contemporary Russia misses on many accounts.[24]

I shall assume that because of Russia's slower pace of modernization, comparison between the West and Russia (and the USSR) is a structure that presents and reproduces itself in the analysis of Russia as a "backward" country.[25] Martin Malia's observation is highly relevant here; he suggested a certain bias in the Western reading of Russia; an ignorant comparison, which always left Russia (and the USSR) as the underdeveloped society, while lifting the West as a civilized and progressive counterpart. This also applies to the topic of discussion in this thesis. On the one hand, we can observe feminist movements and feminist thought in Russia; on the other hand, we must question the necessity of a Western-style feminist movement in Russia. Although Russian women fought for their rights and were allowed to do so within the framework of Soviet socialism, contemporary Russia has moved in a different direction since the transition to a market economy. Moreover, however important it is to take history into consideration, the current environment of social media in which feminism develops within, be it local or global, it changes rapidly. This will be discussed thoroughly in *Chapter 5: Return of*

[24] I will elaborate on this in *Chapter 4*, where I discuss the feminist history of the USSR.
[25] Martin Malia, *Russia under Western Eyes: From the Bronze Horseman to the Lenin Mausoleum*, (London, Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 13.

the Patriarch, where I present contemporary feminism in Russia and how it coexists with and contests growing patriotism and the Russian state project's link to Orthodox Christianity.

To understand what kind of feminism has been imported into Russian feminist groups, I will have to rely partly on a selection of renowned and acknowledged feminists from Western countries, more specifically the USA. The ideas that have been conceived by Western feminists, their activist mode of struggle, and also, their repertoire of contention, has been used by Russian feminists, and adapted to a different cultural context.

2.3 Feminist Theory: Influence from the West

Feminism exists in all corners of the world. It is fronted by individuals, down to everyday situations wherever a woman raised her voice to a man, and also in crisis and war, where women have entered the work force during the Second World War. Modern feminism is, however, first and foremost a social movement phenomenon. As Jasper pointed out, a protest requires multiple dimensions, each dependent on the other, in order to be effective. In the case of feminist movements and protests, as with most movements, entrepreneurs must set fire to a cause, using available resources, such as money, adopting frames for mobilization that attract bystanders and secure resonance, and seeking allies with influential status. By influential status, I refer a status in which a person can influence political figures or the media, and part of this status comes from gender, social class and race. For a marginalised individual or group to gain access to a sphere of influential status, they need a mobilised protest movement to attract the group withholding this access.

2.3.1 bell hooks[26]

The feminist movement has been fronted by thinkers and activists. In the Western context, the oppressive nature of racism intertwines with the question regarding whether women should enjoy equal rights as men, and bell hooks captures the very essence of this in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre.* Although the first edition of *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre* was published in 1984, the issues originally raised by bell hooks was still relevant to the world

[26] hooks, whose real name was Gloria Watkins, published under the pseudonym bell hooks after her grandmother, spelled in lower case to focus on the message in her theories rather than herself. I will refer to her in lower case as well out of respect for academic legacy.

in 2000, when the second edition was published. As twenty-three years has passed since the second edition was published, the world does not look the same, for better or for worse. hooks emphasise that beyond the progress of feminism, there is no sustained feminist revolution; patriarchy prevails. One reason may be that people deem feminism as unnecessary, as the social and political situation for women has improved, which of course is far from the case in all places. hooks further notes that the problem (in 2000) is that feminist discourse is increasing in the corridors of the educated elite, separated from the working class. For real change to happen, she insists that we need feminism that speaks to everyone, to ensure that the feminist movement will lead to better lives for everyone.[27]

There is no solid agreement of what the definition of feminism should be. This could also be the cause for the numbness and indifference around the movement. The absence of a common understanding can create obstacles for building a movement, which can break down societal gender norms. hooks discusses this question in her work, and asks: what are American women fighting for? Since hooks' theories weigh heavy on race and class, in addition to gender, regarding social injustice, she asks why the aim for American feminists is to be equal to men. Men are not equals in white supremacy, capitalist, patriarchal class structure, so she asks which men they want to be equal to. Further, she questions if women share a common vision of what equality means. Women of lower-class recognize the position their male peers holds in society, and shy away from feminism because they recognize that the men of their group are still being oppressed and exploited and would not find it liberating to share their social status.[28] Class is an impending barrier for social movements such as feminism to take form within a community, as the least privileged either does not consider their place in society flawed, or does not perceive the promised liberating as truthful, that they sympathise with their male peers, rather than more privileged women, despite the sexism they endure.[29]

After exploring different definitions and analysing how they were bred out of specific classes, she arrives at this definition:

> Feminism is the struggle to end sexist oppression. Its aim is not to benefit solely any specific group of women, any race, or class of women. It does not privilege women over men. It has the power to transform in a meaningful way all our lives. Most importantly, feminism is neither a lifestyle nor a ready-made identity or role one can step into.[30]

[27] bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre*, (*Preface to the second edition),* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), 14.
[28] Ibid., 18-19.
[29] Ibid., 19.
[30] Ibid., 27.

Beyond this statement, she also recognizes that some women feel comfortable with the lives they live, despite sexist discrimination, exploitation, and oppression. They already deem their lives valuable, hence, if they believe feminism is an alternative lifestyle, they shy away from it altogether.[31]

hook's theory is important for several reasons; first, she criticizes the anti-male role some feminists have been cultivating, arguing that this alienates non-white and already marginalised white women from the movement. By realising that the men of their marginalised group struggles as much as them, women should seek solidarity, rather than the resentment white, bourgeois women saw in their counterparts. In the context of Civil Rights movement, she brings light to the bond that was built between black men and black women in an effort to not let the oppressor separate them in a struggle that would benefit them all in the end. If white women at the time would realise that it is the sexist socialization that teaches us to hate and fear each other and stressed the need for both men and women to resist this, it could create a similar bond to break down the root of patriarchy.[32]

hooks' literary contributions to feminist discourse is based on values well established at the time of the publication of *Feminist Theory: From Margine to Centre* (1984), as the Second Wave feminist movement had shaped the culture of the liberal circles of the USA. It is argued that the Second Wave sprung out from the publication of Betty Friedman's *The Feminine Mystique*, in 1963, or the establishment of the National Organisation for women (NOW) in 1966, which are based on experiences of white women. But at the time of the rise of feminist consciousness within the USA, women of colour were allowed into feminist spaces, which means that their voices and actions also contributed to the start of the movement of Second Wave feminism, as women of colour were also involved in the NOW.[33] I find it important to mention the contribution of women of colour in relation to the Second Wave of feminism, as it differs greatly from the First Wave, where the cause was to promote the rights of white women, which I touched upon earlier in this chapter. Although it is simplifying history to break down history in isolated 'waves', the 'waves' functions as an assistance to have a chronological understanding of feminist developments in history. The Second Wave stretched from the 1960s to the 1980s, where the key achievements were, simply put, dismantlement of social inequity

[31] hooks, *Feminist Theory*, 27.
[32] Ibid., 71.
[33] Becky Thompson, «Multiracial Feminism: Recasting the Chronology of Second Wave Feminism», *Feminist Studies* 28, no. 2, (Summer 2002): 336-360, DOI: https://doi.org/10.2307/3178747, 338.

and the 'traditional' distribution of domestic labour, and sexual oppression;[34] which provided women to work outside the home as well as enjoying sexual liberty, and this movement was inclusive to women of colour and queer women as well. This means that hook's definition of feminism was introduced to a society in which feminism was well established. Therefore, her theories fall under "modern" feminism, with a strong element of solidarity at the core. I am wary to use the term "modern," as it categorizes countries that lack the ideals sprung from Second Wave feminism as archaic and outdated. On the one hand, the theories of hooks originated in the West and is in a sense based on accomplishments already achieved while the USSR was isolated and had internal issues which overshadowed the development of women's rights and feminist discourse. On the other hand, civic rights were not prominent in the Soviet context, and the solidarity that was assumed to be present, was more often than not built on bureaucratic governance and ideology. Subsequently, when I use the term "modern" in this context, I am not implying it as an example or template for other cultural contexts. What hooks tells us, however, is that solidarity and civic rights are factors that coexist within a feminist movement.

2.3.2 Valerie Sperling: On Feminism and Fragile Masculinity

Valerie Sperling's view of feminism is unique, as she keeps in mind how difficult it is to be a feminist in a country such as Russia. However, her definition is clear; feminism is an ideology with the intention to dissemble the patriarchal system our world is constructed around.[35] She points out the contrast of what feminism represent compared to the current stereotypical gender norms that the regimes rely its legitimacy on by the fact that feminism states that gender norms are flexible and nondeterminative. Through feminism, masculinity cannot be used as a legitimation tool politically, because its counterpart, femininity, is fluid and inessential. In a society where the regime relies on gender norms to legitimize itself, feminism is threatening authoritarianism.[36]

It is very noticeable how much effort has been put into the sculpting of Vladimir Putin's masculine image, both domestic and globally. But has the emphasis on his masculinity been a conscious decision all along? This is one of many gendered topics Valerie Sperling answers in

[34] Ivan Jablonka, *A History of Masculinity: From Patriarchy to Gender Justice*, trans. Nathan Bracher, Great Britain: Penguin Books, 2023), 116.
[35] Sperling, *Sex, Politics and Putin*, 348.
[36] Ibid., 423.

her book *Sex, Politics and Putin: Political Legitimacy in Russia,* by highlighting the usage of gender in political discourse and campaigns in Russia. Her theories echo the work of feminist theorist Simone de Beauvoir and masculinity theorists such as James R. Messerschmidt, R. W Connell and Michael S. Kimmel.

When Dmitri Medvedev was officially nominated as a presidential candidate in 2007, one of the delegates of the Russian parliament stated that he was pleased with the choice, as he had always dreamed that a woman would become president.[37] This misogynistic comment was hardly to be misunderstood and is one of several in the Russian political discourse, used as a sting to emasculate Medvedev. It is not uncommon to make misogynistic or homophobic comments such as this in Russia, and Sperling roots this in a larger cultural context. The authorities and their supporters rely on a variety of culturally familiar norms to present their arguments for remaining in power, and serve these as digestible for the majority of the population. It is a method to uphold their political legitimacy.

Sperling emphasises, however, that political legitimacy goes far beyond gender; there are other factors such as economic policies, family values, military strength, and nationalism that also sustain the legendary image of Russian power (*vlast'*).[38] However, by looking back at how Putin was being portrayed during his first years of presidency, compared to Boris Yeltsin during the nine years he served as president of a new Russia, there is a pattern of focusing on masculine qualities. This focal point works in parallel to how well the country was doing at the time. Yeltsin was publicly a drunkard, making Russia the laughingstock of international politics. Putin on the other hand, was depicted as rational, sober, calculating, and firm in the years after he took over as President a decade after Yeltsin was introduced to Russia and the world.[39] Surely a political leader's struggles with alcoholism had nothing to do with how terrible the economy was doing in Russia after the transition from plan economy to market economy, but Putin's distancing from alcoholism did help Russia repair its image as a strong nation with a serious president who happened to serve at a time where the economy gradually took a turn for the better. The focus of sobriety is linked to Putin's masculinity and his ability to lead the nation, but this focus on gender in political legitimacy is not limited to Russia and Sperling calls this a phenomenon:

[37] Sperling, *Sex, Politics and Putin,* 66-67.
[38] Ibid., 25.
[39] Ibid., 72.

> The cultural framing of masculinity under patriarchy makes the assertion of masculinity a vehicle for power.[40]

Further, she explains how misogyny is reducing women and femininity to a lower level of status and power than men and masculinity. Masculinity can in this way be used to assert power over individuals who holds more traditional feminine characteristics. She emphasises that it is however important to note that this phenomenon can only be implemented in societies which has normalized sexism and do not perceive the feminist movement to be relevant.[41] Male violence against women in personal relationships illustrates the physical form of masculine fragility, as it symbolises the actualisation of hierarchical rule,[42] where men use force to establish the hierarchical standard which favours men. This is true for the case in contemporary Russia, as the decriminalization of the domestic violence law showed; where men are given permission to violate women, either verbally, financially, or physically, a general respect for women does not exist. Sperling visualises this through surveys conducted in 2011; the wife was responsible for doing the dishes in 57 percent of families, prepared the food in 65 percent of families, and did the laundry in 75 percent of families. Alas, the domestic labour is still a feminine duty in Russian homes.[43] Yet there is no way of knowing if the use of sexism in political commentary is always done consciously. With that being said, the existence of feminist groups is actively challenging the legitimacy of the authoritarian regime. This could be seen as a positive change, but by the way political commentary works in Russia, the feminist movement has a long way to go.[44]

As misogyny and homophobia is allowed to bloom in political discourse in Russia, Russian feminists are conceived of as a quiet crowd, and they are also being silenced. On the other hand, there are numerous examples that this is not the case, and that feminists in Russia are doing what they can to change their surroundings for the better, with the resources they have at their disposal.[45] In her chapter *When Pussy Riots: Feminist Activism in Russia,* Sperling talked to feminists in response to the phenomenon of Pussy Riot and their approach to feminism. On that occasion, she defines feminism as:

[40] Sperling, *Sex, Politics and Putin,* 26.
[41] Ibid., 26.
[42] hooks, *Feminist Theory,* 120.
[43] Sperling, *Sex, Politics, and Putin,* 110.
[44] Ibid., 423.
[45] *Sex, Politics, and Putin* was first published in 2014 and the freedom of speech has been signifigantly restricted since then. Therefore, the resources feminist groups have at the moment of writing this thesis are scarce.

> an ideology which reveals and seeks to disassemble the patriarchal hierarchy that values masculinity over femininity and relies on homophobia as an instrument of power.[46]

She starts the chapter by highlighting that feminists' work is far from over, by pointing to female representation in government, the global feminization of poverty, reports of rape, domestic murders and honour killings appearing on the news daily.[47] The thesis will return to the theories and findings of Sperling in the following chapters discussing feminist mobilisation and protest in Russia, from *Chapter 4* to *Chapter 6.*

2.3.3 Rebecca Solnit

What does it take of resources to voice inequality? Other feminist writers have turned this question around, and analysed the tragedy of masculinity and patriarchy. To illustrate the tragedy of masculinity, American feminist writer Rebecca Solnit quotes bell hooks:

> The first act of violence that patriarchy demands of males is not violence towards women. Instead, patriarchy demands of all males that they engage in acts of psychic self-mutilation, that they kill off the emotional parts of themselves. If an individual is not successful in emotionally crippling himself, he can count on patriarchal men to enact rituals of power that will assault his self-esteem.[48]

This quote is from Solnit's book *The Mother of All Questions,* which explores the ways women are being silenced and she uses hooks' theory to build her own argument that male silence of themselves contributes to the silencing of women and queer people,[49] which we have seen are two underrepresented or even repressed groups in the Russian media. As Valerie Sperling points out, the masculinity project of Putin is upholding this patriarchal message that men such as Putin are superior men who women should want to be with, and men should aspire to be. The message that is being pointed out by hooks speaks for so many silenced men. Solnit further comments that the ways men silence themselves, are by distancing themselves from what is considered feminine; such as the colour pink, a small thing to pay attention to, but this distancing goes on further to emotions, expressiveness, or receptiveness in everyday life. This is often the case for men who inhabit masculinized realms- such as sports, the military, the

[46] Sperling, *Sex, Politics and Putin,* 348.
[47] Ibid., 347.
[48] Solnit, *The Mother of All Questions,* (London: Granta, 2017), 27.
[49] Ibid., 27.

police, all-male workforces in construction or resource extraction- must be renounced to belong.[50]

In the chapter *Feminism: The Men Arrive (2014)* Solnit argues how important it is to include men in feminism:

> Feminism needs men. For one thing, the men who hate and despise women will be changed, if they change, by a culture in which doing horrible things to, or saying horrible things about, women will undermine rather than enhance a man's standing with other men.[51]

The correlation of men's participation in feminist movements is a reoccurring theme in this thesis, which I will return to in the chapters from *Chapter 4* to *Chapter 7.*

Chapter Three

3.0 Methodology: Case Studies and Qualitative Interviews

As outlined above, this thesis aims to explore the concept of feminism within a Russian context. Although there are several other academic studies surrounding this topic, the concept of feminism is as fluid as that of culture, with the exception that cultural framing most often is critical as to the success of feminist movements. Like most movements, feminist movements can echo changes in society and reshape culture.

The Russian context is a special one, however. While the politics of authoritarianism surely limits the opportunities for feminist movements to form and mobilize, the Russian context is also one in which patriarchal values have survived, and morphed into different systems of socialization. The Russian authorities did not suddenly "turn wicked" in February 2022, although it would appear so through the Western mainstream media reports. The invasion of Ukraine did come to many as a shock, even though Vladimir Putin had built up to this since the annexation of Crimea in 2014. The invasion in 2022 did show the true colours of Putinism to the world, however, and while the ones who suffer the ripple effects are the people of Ukraine, also the inhabitants inside Russia note a substantial change of mood and opportunities.

[50] Solnit, *The Mother of All Questions*, 28-29.
[51] Ibid., 99.

The aim of the fieldwork done for this MA is to check for several aspects of this change. First, as Putin illustrates his wrath on Ukraine, it is reasonable to assume that his public image as a leader, strengthens in Russia. The result of this would be an isolated population, where the majority are fed propaganda daily and the minorities suffer the consequences. Second, it is clear that for the minorities, specifically the sexual minorities, Putin's wrath has been constant since his election in 2000. Through an ever-tighter symbiosis between Putin and the Orthodox church, "traditional values" has made an entry into society over the past two decades, and consequently, movements such as feminism struggle to plant a root within a society embracing discriminatory gender roles, leaving little to no room for non-traditional women and queer people.

Subsequently, a starting point for analysis is the following: Although the world woke up to a Russian aggression rising to new levels, the Russian population was no stranger to this brutality. Respondents will then be points of connectivity, between what used to be, and what is now the case in Russia. Through this thesis I will explore how feminism is perceived in Russia after 2022, not by comparing it to Western feminist philosophy, but by assuming that the context of Western feminism is relevant to *understand* how feminist ideas can translate to a Russian context. Most importantly, I intend to answer Russia can develop a feminism through their own framework, in their own pace and shape, using two methods of research: case studies and qualitative interviews.

3.1 Case studies: Protest Literature and Biographies

To understand how feminism is received in Russia, one must understand that it is something to be perceived, and that those who perceive it, reinterpret its content by adopting certain strategies for action. In other words, while the origins of the movement are foreign, ideas will still be domesticated. Domestication of such ideas will foster counter-mobilization and coercive actions from the state. The fact that a foreign movement is being imported into a culture which embraces "traditional values" is threatening to Putin and his political legitimacy, as he built it on a culture that differs from the egalitarian Soviet past. For this reason, case studies of how central entrepreneurs of feminist ideas strategize action, and interpret ideational content, is of importance in this thesis. My choice of entrepreneurs is the protest biographies of Pussy Riot-members, Nadezhda (Nadya) Tolokonnikova and Maria (Masha) Alyokhina, and Kira Yarmysh, the Press Secretary of Aleksey Navalny. These women shared the common faith of

being punished for their protest against the Russian authorities. Their cases do however differ to a great deal, which is why the cases are studied separately.

The nodal point for each case is the protest biography of an individual, not a group or a movement. Case 1 discusses the protest biography of Tolokonnikova, who gained international fame after she protested the Orthodox Church and Russian authorities in Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow. Case 2, the protest biography of Masha Alyokhina, overlaps with that of Tolokonnikova; both were arrested and served two years in a penal colony charged with hooliganism. The cases of Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina intertwine as they are part of the same art collective Pussy Riot. They have both published literary works, where they tell their own stories of their experiences in Russian punitive colonies. Although their publications differ in style and content, the material is useful for this thesis, as their art collective, Pussy Riot, are described as "feminist" in mainstream media in the West. Due to this description, I analyse the feminist aspects of their works in *Chapter 6*, to gain a better understanding of their definition of how feminism is framed in a Russian context. I also utilize their social media profiles on YouTube and Instagram, as well as media reports on the case of Pussy Riot and the members as individuals, to analyse the message behind their creative ways of protesting. In Case 1, I analyse the feminist aspects, protest methods and the experiences of Tolokonnikova in *Read & Riot: A Pussy Riot Guide to Activism* (2018), and in Case 2, I analyse the feminist aspects and Alyokhina's narrative of Pussy Riot's protest and the following consequences in *Riot Days* (2017).

Case 3 discusses the literary work of Kira Yarmysh, the Press Secretary of oppositional politician Alexey Navalny. Yarmysh also spent time in prison, which experiences she based her debut novel *Incredible Events in Women's Cell No. 3* (2020) on. Her protest biography departs from case 1 and 2, however. Her book is fiction, but the characters represent a reality of different women who share a cell for very different crimes. The conversations Yarmysh depicts invite the reader into a unique context, where the characters discuss feminist themes such as lesbianism, prostitution, and their own complicated relationships with men. Through these conversations, critical thinking arises *within* the main character, where she questions her own understanding of what it means to be a woman in Russia and which issues are worth debating. As opposed to case 1 and 2, then, case 3 represents more distant reflections about feminist discourse, and not action-oriented feminism. Her debut novel is definitely feminist literature; the author question-marks herself within the novel, and as the book covers themes of queerness in Russia, it also threatens Putin's legitimacy by questioning the "traditional values" he claims

to be a primordial trait of Russian culture. For this reason, her novel is an important work of not only feminist literature, but also protest literature.

The cases have in common that they all served time in Russian prisons, detention centres or punitive camps and that they are all working towards a free Russia, without Putin. Hence, the cases are chosen to emphasise the political activists who are campaigning against Putin, while also promoting feminism in a country facing an uncertain future. The context is one of patrimonialism and masculinity, as their president is promoting damaging gender roles and waging a horrendous war against the neighbouring country.

The interviews will serve as a nodal point for discussing resonance and deviation. The war has caused several political activists to emigrate, and regular inhabitants who openly does not support the war face severe punishment, due to new strict laws regarding publications discussing the war.[5253] Subsequently, I would expect that this has an impact on how feminism is perceived, and the primary task of the interviews, is to verify or debunk this hypothesis. More on this below.

3.2 Qualitative interviews: Theory in practice

Although case studies provide solid insights into political activism in Russia, they do not cover how regular inhabitants, whose freedom of speech have also been subjugated, perceive feminism and womens' rights. This is also why this thesis also includes qualitative interviews with select respondents.

I based the process of preparation for the interviews and the implementation of the interviews on the theories of Aksel Tjora in *Kvalitative forskningsmetoder i praksis,* which provides a practical guide on how to approach the interview process in qualitative methodology. I conducted depth interviews, which purpose is to study the opinions, attitudes, and experiences of a group of people, in other words, depth interviews are utilized to understand the world view of the respondents,[54] and I found the best way to approach this was to follow Tjora's interview guide. The guide encourages the usage of a structure consisting of three stages- (1) "warm-up

[52] Georgi Kantchev, Evan Gershkovich, Yuliya Chernova, "Fleeing Putin, Thousands of Educated Russians Are Moving Abroad», *The Wall Street Journal,* April 10, 2022, https://www.wsj.com/articles/fleeing-putin-thousands-of-educated-russians-are-moving-abroad-11649583003.
[53] Haley Bader, «Leaving Russia: Four Artists Forced into Exile», *The Moscow Times,* June 8, 2023, https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/06/08/leaving-russia-four-artists-forced-into-exile-a81421.
[54] Aksel Tjora, *Kvalitative forskningsmetoder i praksis*, (Oslo: Gyldendal Akademisk, 2012), 105.

questions", (2) "reflection questions" and (3) "closing questions".[55] I followed this guide and customized it into relevancy for my group of respondents. The interview guide is attached to the Appendix.[56]

I opened the interviews with "warm-up questions" by asking the respondents about their preferred pronouns. Although the questioning of gender pronouns is "new" to many, I believed that it would be respectable to open a very personal interview where the respondents understands that I respect them regardless of their gender identity.[57] Following this, I asked them about their age, occupation, whether or not they are students, place of residence, what they enjoy doing on their spare time and if they have a social network in their place of residence. All these questions are relevant to the following "reflection" questions, but for the sake of their anonymity, I will not publish any information that can identify them in any way, which I informed the respondents about.

The "reflection questions" were answered very differently and had various lengths. I informed them beforehand that the questions might be long, and that they would be welcomed to elaborate however much they were comfortable with. These questions revolved around how the invasion of Ukraine had affected their everyday lives and their planes for the future. This was a major focus in most of the interviews, as the topic was fairly recent and still a big part of the lives of the respondent. This was to gain an understanding of their possible desire to emigrate from Russia or to stay, based on their relationship with their motherland and their financial ability to apply for a visa and leave Russia by plane, which is more difficult due to sanctions from other countries. I also asked them about how they experienced the elections in 2012 and 2018 in Russia, in order to open up a conversation about their feelings regarding Putin as a president. Through these two reflection questions, the respondents were able to speak freely about how they wish Russia would change and it became apparent that they do not support the current president. It also gave an understanding of the sexual orientation of some of the respondents, which is relevant to mention, as queer people are a discriminated minority in Russia, and due to firmer laws restricting their freedom of speech and right to love whomever they want, being queer in Russia has become more dangerous than before.

[55] Tjora, *Kvalitative forskningsmetoder i praksis*, 112-113.
[56] I created two different interview guides as I had two focus groups: Russian emigrants and Russian inhabitants. Although my project changed, the core of the questions regarding personal safety and thoughts on the authoritarian laws developing since the invasion of Ukraine.
[57] The question of «pronouns» is to understand how the person wishes to be referred to. For example: she/her, he/him, they/them, etc. Depending on the gender identity of the person.

The "closing questions" were questions about their personal safety, whether they would feel safer in a different country and if they feel safe in their current location. The respondents answered this at various length, depending on their sexuality, family relations and their feelings about personal security, regarding authority figures such as the police, or government officials. Once they had answered these questions, I asked if they wanted to add something I had not asked them throughout the interview. This invited them to move away from the interview and talk freely about their experiences outside of the relevancy of the interview which led to having interesting conversations after I let them know I had stopped recording.

3.2.1 Research participation and fieldwork challenges

The interviews were conducted in the period from October to November of 2022. At this time, my research aim was targeted to explore a potential emigration wave amongst Russian women after Russia invaded Ukraine, and as a result of an authoritarian government turning more hostile, making women feel less safe. This is why most of the interview questions was surrounding the respondents' reflections about how the war has affected their lives. My turn of focus towards feminist movements in Russia took place after the interviews were done; therefore, I am not able to use all the data the interviews provided. As the intent was to research Russian, female emigration since the invasion of Ukraine, the questions were directly linked to how the daily life of the respondents had changed and how their future had been altered with due to travel restrictions and growing Russophobia abroad. The information is still highly relevant to the research topic of feminism, as the theme was touched upon in several parts of the interviews.

The recruitment of respondents is based on their ability to reflect over a certain topic and provide a unique perspective on the topic in question.[58] Therefore, I contacted a woman I met in Moscow in 2019, through Instagram, to ask her if she would be interested in participating in my research project. I contacted her as I knew she cares about the topic of women's rights and was interested to hear her perspective on the current situation in Russia. Through her, I was able to contact several other women who wanted to participate in my research project. Separate from these participants, another one of the participants was recruited through a feminist event in Oslo, early 2022. Before the interviews were conducted, the respondents were given a consent form, which contained information about the project; the purpose of the project, which

[58] Tjora, *Kvalitative forskningsmetoder i praksis,* 145.

at the time was to explore a potential trend of emigration of Russian women as a consequence of the invasion of Ukraine. On this consent form, I also informed the respondents that I would record the interviews, though I gave them the option to ask not to be recorded.

As I was unable to travel to Russia, I realised I had to conduct the interviews in a non-traditional way. I found that Zoom was the best option, as all the respondents were familiar with the platform after years of COVID-19. Although conducting an interview through Zoom is untraditional, it is not unusual in recent years. Lisa M. Gray et al. writes in «Expanding Qualitative Research Interviewing Strategies: Zoom Video Communications» that in comparison to other platforms such as Skype, Zoom does not require an account and is able to create a live link, which only requires a click to join the meeting.[59] This is how I invited the respondents; with a link I sent them by e-mail, without any text that would indicate that they had been invited to join a video call for an interview (this was done to protect their safety, as some feared that their e-mails could be read and linked to my research project).

They also note the advantage of utilising video conference platforms such as Zoom, is the accessibility it allows the participants, as neither participant, nor the researcher is required to spend time or money on travel. It also allows both parties to exit the interview without major consequences for the outcome. It does however require access to high-speed internet, and potential technical issues. Although Zoom is a cost-free service, the authors recommend paying the small cost of a membership for optimizing the experience. Until recently, there has been reluctance to use video conference platforms for the purpose of interviewing, but since the rise of social media, interviewing over a video conference platform does not seem to impact participants negatively. They also note the cons of the requirement of high-speed internet accessibility, as this is limited to geographic spaces where internet access is a given. Therefore, it results in a less diverse data sample.[60] As all the respondents for this research project were located in larger cities, the potential disadvantage of internet unavailability did not arise. The respondents were also familiar with Zoom, as it was popularised during the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced most students and several office workers to participate in video conferences through several periods of lockdown.

The respondents were invited to be interviewed without camera, as I wanted them to feel safe throughout the whole process. I also let them know that I would record the interviews with a

[59] Lisa M. Gray, Gwen R. Rempel, Gina Wong, Karen Cook, «Expanding Qualitative Research Interviewing Strategies: Zoom Video Communications», *The Qualitative Report* 25, no. 5 (May 2020) 1292-1301, DOI: 10.46743/2160-3715/2020.4212, 1294.
[60] Ibid., 1297-98.

tape recorder, though I gave them the option to decline if they did not feel comfortable with being recorded. This never became an issue as they were all consenting to being recorded.

I conducted the interviews in November 2022, after my research project was approved by *Norsk Senter for Forskingsdata* (NSD), (the Norwegian Centre for Research Data) in October 2022. Through NSD I was able to produce a consent form, which I sent to the respondents before the interviews started. This consent form also allowed the respondents to remove themselves from the research project with immediate action. Luckily, this did not become an issue, and I was able to interview six (female) respondents in total. I originally planned to interview more, but the recruitment of respondents proved to be more difficult than first anticipated. Although I asked several women on different occasions, both through social media and in person, with polite declines or lack of answers. Either because they were too busy, or they did not feel safe to be interviewed. The question of safety is central to this thesis and will be a reoccurring theme both through the interviews and analysis of the case studies and the remaining chapters.

All the respondents speak English, which made it possible to conduct the interviews in a language we both understand. I acknowledge that it would be optimal that the participants could speak in their native language, but it would be clumsy of me to cover such a sensitive subject I am not completely fluent in. The natural flow of the interview is greatly due to the comfort level of the respondents and myself in English. This also illustrates the group of Russian women I was able to interview, as they are able to read and watch news in English and feel comfortable speaking to foreigners about the domestic issues of Russia. I also got the feeling that they appreciated someone reaching out to them and asking them about their feelings and experiences in the recent years, as they sense a rising Russophobia abroad. It does however limit my research, as these are women who does not belong to the population that appreciate Putin as their president, which of course shapes their view of the world in a different way than those who listen to Putin's speeches and the news which glorifies him.

The change of my research project after I had conducted the interviews was also a challenge in my fieldwork. As I had made two different interview guides based on the location of the participants, as I interviewed women based in Russia and women based outside Russia. The purpose of this was to compare their experiences based on their decision to stay in or leave their home country. Through the "reflection questions", I focused too much on how the war has affected the respondents in their everyday life and too little on questions my current thesis question is centred around. I do however argue that the answers of respondents provided me

with useful material which contribute greatly to my thesis question, which will be discussed in *Chapter 7*, where I will analyse and discuss the outcome of the interviews.

Chapter Four

4.0 In Memory of Soviet Feminism

Before I move on to contemporary feminism, I find it important to create a foundation of understanding the origins of feminism in a country that no longer exist, though which culture has deep roots in Russian society. While Pankhurst and her fellow suffragettes struggled and fought violently for basic human rights in Great Britain, Tsarist Russia was already weak and the Bolsheviks were on the brink of taking over Russia, eventually turning it into a socialist republic of the USSR. As Russia was in chaos at the time of Western feminist's uprising, Russian feminists had other priorities, and they were also active revolutionaries. After the Bolsheviks seized power in 1917, they realised that their cause for women's rights was linked to the common cause for the proletariat, with feminist struggle as an extra layer. Still, the idea of women abandoning their domestic responsibilities was not very popular amongst Russian men at the time, yet Soviet leaders realised the potential and need for female participation in the development of a new socialist state. Although the causes intertwined, focus on feminist issues as isolated issues was not encouraged by the Communist Party, in fact, feminism suffered a low status and was perceived as bourgeois by the Communist Party. One could also see the effects of increased equality as a double-edged sword, as the gender roles did not change behind closed doors over the years after Stalin's death. Women were still expected to be a homemaker once they got home from work.[61]

4.1 Were Soviet Revolutionaries Feminist?

The politics of the USSR was formed by the theory of Marxism and Leninism and relied heavily on the writings of Karl Marx, Fredrich Engels, Vladimir Lenin and August Bebel. Thanks to the literate contribution of these men, revolutionaries were inspired to mobilize for the idea of socialism and communism, and also, to realise a dream of a fully socialist state. However, Marx' analytical model of the proletariat worker was limited to that of an adult male. Thus, by

[61]Valerie Sperling, *Sex, Politics, and Putin*, 88.

alienating a large group of the population from the society the workers would form, the socialist utopia did not really involve rights for women.

Soma Marik highlights this when discussing Bebel's treatment of women in *Women in the Past, Present and Future;* as he suggested, there was (1) a double oppression of the working class women, who would not be liberated while still being burdened by domestic work, (2) through the realisation of this double oppression, the realisation of socialism would not be possible without full participation from women, (3) the sexual oppression and double standard in regards to sexual morality could lead to women of other classes to unite against socialism.[62] Subsequently, there was a necessity to have women participate to build a successful socialist society; this explains also why some women were eager to participate in the class struggle that would lead to the Russian revolution. The promise of liberation from domestic labour and contribution to society was understandably very tempting. The theories these Marxist writers contributed were, however, simply theories, whose promises of liberation from sexual oppression and domestic labour were not fulfilled to their full extent. Although the theories of Bebel seemed feminist, Marik comments that he did assume that domestic labour was women's work. Instead of dividing the domestic labour to both genders, the labour of childcare was transferred parts of the work to the public sphere.[63]

Alexandra Kollontai, a key figure within female revolutionaries, was also intrigued by the texts of Babel as well as those of Friedrich Engels and other socialist theorists, as she came to see socialism as a gateway to full equality between women and men. She was however very aware that women's economic independence was not sufficient, and that true equality came with a complete reform of the gender roles in the home.[64] As domestic labour came in addition to working outside the home to women, Kollontai intended to bring the words of Bebel to life. Through socialization of domestic labour, such as public laundromats, canteens and collective apartments, women would not be imprisoned by their marriage. Without women's expectations in the home, their personal and professional potential could thrive, as well as marry whomever they would like. Based on love, not out of necessity for having their basic needs met through the provision of food, money, and shelter.[65] Kollontai was, however, ridiculed by her male comrades who would not take women's issues into consideration of the building of a new

[62] Soma Marik, "Proletarian Socialism and Women's Liberation: The Historical Roots of Socialist-Feminism", *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 61, (2000), https://www.jstor.org/stable/44144433, 1195.
[63] Ibid., 1195
[64] Kristen Ghodsee, *Red Valkyries: Feminist Lessons from Five Revolutionary Women*, (New York, London: Verso, 2022), 51.
[65] Ibid., 55-56.

society, and they were not alone, women comrades also disagreed with her as they feared focus on women's issue would provoke these men. In 1918, Kollontai wrote:

> […] My party comrades accused me and those women-comrades who shared my views of being "feminists" and of placing too much emphasis on matters of concern to women only… I demanded from the Party that it espouse the cause of women's liberation. I did not always have an easy time of it. Much passive resistance, little understanding, and even less interest for this aim, over and over again, lay as an obstacle in the path.[66]

No matter how much resistance her comrades gave her, she saw the potential in showing how much the socialist state *needed* women. Her alliance with Vladimir Lenin was also helpful in her efforts to improve the lives of Russian women, as he named Kollontai the Commissar for Social Welfare on October 28, 1917. That same month, a year later, the Code of Laws concerning the Civil Registration of Deaths, Births and Marriages was incorporated into a new Family Law by the highest body of the USSR. This marked a significant change for Soviet women, as The Code overturned all laws which made women the property of fathers and husbands and abolished the church's involvement in marriages and divorce. Because of this step, women's autonomy was strengthened, as women were able to leave abusive husbands; however, the code also enabled irresponsible fathers to leave women they were forced to marry because of unwanted pregnancies.[67] This said, the Code broke down years of patriarchal abuse of women and made their future seem brighter. In fact, two years later, in 1920, abortion during the first twelve weeks of pregnancy was legalized, making USSR the first country in the world to do so.[68]

Unfortunately, these laws did not survive for long. As Joseph Stalin became General Secretary of the USSR, history took a turn for the worse. However, he did see women as a source of labour, and parts of his Five-Year plans were to increase the presence of women in industrial labour. In fact, his aim by the year 1935, was that forty two percent of industrial workers would be women. With this enormous increase of female presence in the industry, men would need to unlearn their perception of what 'masculine' work is, and what 'feminine' work is. The increasing presence of female workers was not met with open arms from their male colleagues, even though there was no attempt to force men to participate in the domestic labour women were still burdened with. Quite the contrary, millions of mothers were active workers, while taking care of their children in communal households, some without plumbing and labour-

[66] Ghodsee, *Red Valkyries*, 57.
[67] Ibid., 62-63.
[68] Ibid., 64.

saving devices being a rarity.[69] A consequence of this unwillingness to collaborate with the newly 'liberated' women was high divorce rates and abortions, outnumbering live births. This later resulted in a family plan campaign provided by the state, making abortions illegal, divorces more expensive and providing mothers of large families with awards in 1936.[70] After Stalin's death, women were again granted access to safe abortions in 1955.[71]

It is important to keep in mind that these firm decisions on the private lives of Soviet women were made by a man who was also responsible of the deaths of thousands of Soviet men and the arrest of their wives shortly after. The women were reduced to objects in a political scheme during Stalin's years as General Secretary. The objectification of women in the context of them being pieces in Stalin's Five Year-plans to increase productivity clarifies the fact that they were nothing but just that, pieces/ pawns in a game they were not playing themselves. The constant change of abortion laws proves that women's bodies were under the control of the state, even when abortion once again became legal, it was not enforced by feminist motives, neither were the employment of women into male-dominated workspaces.

4.2 Feminist Orientalism

As this thesis discusses how Western feminist philosophy has influenced Russia throughout history, it is important to ask who the "West" is and to whom "East" is. Returning to Kollontai, who was in many ways influenced by the West, through her years in exile, she was also the Western influencer to the women of the Caucasus, Volga, and Central Asia, and Soviet Asia. I introduced the involvement of revolutionary women's rights activists in what was the "East" for women such as Kollontai, and her colleagues in the *Zhenotdel*. The indigenous women of Soviet Asia were shaped by the religious and patriarchal society in which they lived, meaning that they were secluded and veiled, and not permitted to interact with men outside their immediate family. To solve the isolation of these women, the *Zhenotdel* opened 'women only' cooperations and clubs, which allowed the women of namely Uzbekistan to participate in society, as the establishments also came with childcare facilities, medical consultations, and

[69] Elena Schulman, «Women and Soviet Power» in *Stalinism on the Frontier of Empire: Women and State Formation in the Soviet Far East*, edited by Elena Shulman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), DOI: doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511497131.004, 38-39.
[70] Ibid., 40.

[71] Barbara Leavoy, Garrett Jordan, "The Capitalist Hijacking of International Women's Day: Russian and American Considerations", *Journal of International Women's Studies,* Vol. 14, no. 3, (July 2013): 244-258, https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol14/iss3/17/, 249.

cultural activities. Women also opened women-only shops in the cooperatives, where they could sell products to women directly, thus leaving them independent from needing a male chaperone. What started with 225 cooperatives in 1925, grew to 1,500 in 1926.[72]

The advancements of women's work were, however, washed away by an initiative introduced by men in the *Sredazburo*, the party organisation in the East. The initiative is infamously known as "Hujum", which aim was to convince a mass of indigenous women to 'unveil' themselves. As I mentioned in *Chapter 2*, this ended with indigenous women being at the end of violence. Although the Russian members of the *Zhenotdel* argued that the mass unveiling would put the indigenous women in danger, rather than 'setting them free', the campaign was still carried out by seventy-thousand women throughout six months, who burned their veils. Not only did this lead to violence, it also damaged the work of the *Zhenotdel* and the indigenous women who established a safe space for feminist progress to take place- in their own pace, without aggravating their male counterparts. Instead, the streets of Uzbek towns became no-go zones for women. It was later revealed that the "Hujum" campaign was an attack on the Islamic clerics and on the cultural and social frames of the society in the "East".[73]

I emphasise that the usage of women's liberation to dehumanise a society the hegemonic culture deems 'behind', does not correlate with the Western influence on women's liberation in the USSR and contemporary Russia. The attack on religious leaders in the name of feminism, was not done in agreement with women whose work empowered indigenous women in Uzbekistan, hence, it was simply one more way the Soviet authorities weaponised feminism to enforce their agenda. It is precisely this weaponizing of feminism that leads to the next chapter of this thesis. Although women experienced a small portion of liberation through entering the work force in the USSR, they were still homemakers. This did not change once the USSR transitioned into the Russian Federation, yet the social welfare that allowed Soviet women to participate in the work force, disappeared with the USSR. This led to an unbalance regarding family planning, which the eventual resurrected Orthodox Church had a very detailed ideology to solve.

[72] Anne McShane, «Women at the Heart of the Revolution», *Jacobin*, November 9, 2019, https://jacobin.com/2019/08/alexandra-kollontai-soviet-womens-rights-revolution-zhenotdel-uzbekistan.
[73] Ibid.

Chapter Five

5.0 Return of the Patriarch

The formality of Soviet gender-policies were by the 1990s replaced with new uncertainties. While Russia approached democracy and a market-economy, inhabitants were traumatised by decades of censorship, government surveillance and financial instability in the transition to what reformers framed as the new market economy. This opened a playground for an already established mafia. As state assets were privatized and available for purchase, businesses relied on protection from gangsters, as well as former KGB agents, and former soldiers traumatised by the questionable and brutal Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (*boevoe bratstvo*) became a substantial sub-political force.[74] In addition to state assets being sold, Russia suffered severe inflation, which led to pensions not being paid, savings disappearing and unemployment.[75] In this environment, chaos and corruption shaped the new society, creating an anxious population amongst moral decay; with the rise of the mafia came human trafficking, drug trafficking and a police institution one could not trust, due to corruption becoming the norm.[76]

History is a necessary part of analysing contemporary politics and culture. Without it, understanding Russia would be an extremely confusing and challenging task, as the concept of contemporary culture in Russia is similar to surrounding countries, yet there is something different. Christianity is widespread throughout Europe, yet few countries held on to the early branch: Orthodox Christianity. Due to the exclusivity of the practises conveyed by the Orthodox Church, it is intrinsically linked to the prevalent culture in the countries where it is being practised. Putin is well aware of this and uses the church as a resource for political legitimation.

Three specific factors should be underlined. First, as Russia was suffering under moral decay during the transition from plan economy to market economy, and gangsters were able to bully the population into cooperating with them, religion was a possible escape route and comfort for many. Adding to this, although Russia is a diverse country with several religions being practiced, Orthodox Christianity holds a historic significance to ethnic Russians and other East Slavic people. Finally, since religious practise was banned under the rule of the Communist Party, traditions were altered, as were gender roles to a certain degree. The fact that women

[74] Mark Galeotti, «Gangster's Paradise: How Organized Crime Took Over Russia», *The Guardian*, March 23, 2018. https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/mar/23/how-organised-crime-took-over-russia-vory-super-mafia.
[75] Bullough, Oliver, *The Last Man in Russia: And the Struggle to Save a Dying Nation*, 209.
[76] Galeotti, «Gangster's Paradise», *The Guardian*, https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/mar/23/how-organised-crime-took-over-russia-vory-super-mafia.

entered the labour force was a step further away from the oppression women suffered under the social norms of religion. However, once religion was re-introduced, so was the traditional, patriarchal society.

In the upshot, as Orthodox Christianity was resurrected into the normative Russian society, the traditional values were a natural companion. The 'traditional values' reintroduced under Vladimir Putin centres womanhood around family and maternity, in other words, the expectation that women's primary function is that of motherhood.[77] I must, however, emphasise that the return to 'traditional values' and Orthodox faith did not happen due to strong cultural currents alone; the collaboration of the Kremlin was vital. While many may have been attracted to the social values of Orthodox Christianity, there was also a political motive to preserve Russian tradition and mentality. This political motive also involved a pushback of the values of the West and came to coexist with the idea of rebuilding Russia as a global superpower.

In this spirit, the *Russkiy Mir* Foundation was introduced in 2007 by Vladimir Putin. Patriarch Kirill describes *Russkiy Mir* as a community based on Orthodox faith and Russian culture, and as a preserver of a common historical memory.[78] Patriarch Kirill also provided a bridge between Russian culture and Orthodox faith with this statement, and he declared that Orthodox Christianity was the norm for affiliation to the Russian culture and society. Putin also emphasised this in a speech where he compared the morality of Russia, a country faithful to its traditional values, to that that of Western countries, which had abandoned their own traditional roots. In the same speech, he linked traditional values to religion. This should come as no surprise, as the modernization of Russia was dependent on the revival of traditional values which is dependent on the morality of the Orthodox faith. Through the collaboration with the State Duma, traditional values have received increasing legislative protection. This background explains the state-sponsored persecution of the LGBTQ-community, as the Russian Federation banned propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations among minors in 2013.[79] Recently, this ban has been updated to a further censored society, as the ban has been expanded to make propaganda of non-traditional sexual relation among everyone. It entails a ban of celebrating homosexuality and simply calling homosexuality "normal", in addition to this, the law includes

[77] Nadezhda Petrusenko, «A Conservative Turn in a Patriarchal Cociety?» in *Conservatism and Memory Politics in Russia and Eastern Europe*, ed. Katalin Miklossy, Makkru Kangaspuro, (Oxon: Routledge, 2022), DOI: 10.4324/9781003251743-3, 25.
[78] Alicja Curanović and Lucian Leustean, «The Main Features of Traditional Values in Russian Discourse», in *The Guardians of Traditional Values: Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church in the Quest for Status*, German Marshall Fund of the United States, February 1, 2015: 8-10, https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep19000.6, 8
[79] Ibid., 8

ban of "paedophilia"-propaganda and gender reassignment in books, advertising and films. Punishment for breaking this law is a fine of 400,000 roubles and a 5 million roubles fine for legal entities. Foreigners can serve up to fifteen days in jail or face deportation. Russian senator Taimmuraz Dzambekovich stated that "the more they squeal in the West, the more we will be sure that we are on the right track".[80] The more the West enforce its values onto Russia, the stronger they fight back, which is made extremely clear through this recent legislation passed to protect their traditional values.

Although it might be obvious, the mention of traditional values linked to religion does not provide enough context. Of course, Christianity is generally rather traditional, in the sense that they value a patriarchal structure and gender roles. To clarify further, the World Russian People's Council issued the document "The Basic Values: the Fundaments of National Unity", which provides a catalogue of seventeen values: faith, justice (the rightful place in of nation in the international community), peace, freedom (limited by moral obligations), unity, morality, dignity, honesty, patriotism, solidarity, mercy, family, culture and national tradition, prosperity, diligence, self-limitation (resignation from consumption) and devotion (to the homeland and nation).[81] Through this guideline of values issued by the state and church, recent laws and law suggestions appear far more reasonable in the Russian context.

As economic instability pushed Russian society into the comfort of religion in the 1990s, the political chaos also pushed women to simultaneously organise and assemble to protest the financial inequality as the social welfare they had been relying on in the USSR was declining. Because of the uncertain future women saw ahead, a large number of self-help group and employment-training organisations formed, in order to promote female independence, as women could no longer trust financial stability from social welfare as the entire country was facing a financial crisis.[82] In 1985, the Soviet Women's Committee was the only women's organisation of Soviet Russia, while more than 300 women's group were officially registered by Russia's Ministry of Justice in 1994.[83] The subchapter below discuss the feminist movements blooming in Russia since the fall of the USSR and how the movements are being

[80] Uliana Pavlova, «Russia's upper house of parliament passes tougher ban on 'LGBT propaganda'», November 30, 2022. https://edition.cnn.com/2022/11/30/europe/russia-upper-parliament-lgbt-propaganda-law-intl/index.html
[81] Alicja Curanović and Lucian Leustean, «The Main Features of Traditional Values in Russian Discourse», in *The Guardians of Traditional Values: Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church in the Quest for Status*, German Marshall Fund of the United States, February 1, 2015: 8-10, https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep19000.6, 8.
[82] Valerie Sperling, *Organizing Women in Contemporary Russia: Engendering Transition*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, DOI: 10.1017/CBO9780511489082, 18.
[83] Ibid., 15-18.

shaped by contemporary Russian culture, despite the rise of 'traditional values' and the Orthodox Church upholding the gender roles feminism fight against.

5.1 Feminist Resurrection

The hardships of the 1990s made the introduction of feminism in Russia just as illusory as that of introducing a market economy. The tragedy of women shying away from a movement focusing solely on women's rights, and of male counterparts not sympathising with a feminist cause, affected how the following generations in Soviet Russia and contemporary Russia came to perceive traditional gender roles. Of course, the Kremlin, with the help from the Orthodox Church pushed the narrative of these gender roles a step further, but society was in part prepared for accepting traditions of this kind, so in a way, the water was already warm when they stepped into it.

The social norm of post-communist Russia was already expecting women to perform 'feminine tasks', such as domestic and emotional labour as well as performing/participating in professional fields. Despite the vicious cycle of misogyny repeated also by the women themselves – i.e. songs to honour the masculinity of Putin, some feminist movements did their best to work against the systematic oppression. One of these feminists was Olga Lipovskaya, the founder of *Petersburg Centre for Gender Issues,* an NGO dedicated to implement gender equality legislation in Russia. The centre also employed Russian, feminist researchers and provided women with information about empowerment strategies.[84] Before she founded the centre, she was already a known Soviet feminist also in Western feminist circles, due to her involvement with a rock *tusovka*[85] in the 1970's, which consisted of women and men who were aware of the concept of feminism, and her *samizdat* works and translations of Western feminist literature, as well as English publications. Lipovskaya admits she was influenced by Western ideas of feminism and translated several Western works into Russian, such as *What Do Women Want* by Susie Obrach and Luise Eichenbaum, *Compulsory Heterosexuality* by Adrienne Rich, *If Freud Was a Woman* from 'Moving beyond Words' by Gloria Steinem. Her first meeting with Western feminism was through a man in her *tusovka,* who introduced her to *Sweet Freedom* by Beatrix Campbell and Anne Coute. She notes that foreign literature did not enter her mind without critical thinking, but they helped her articulate the feelings she already had.

[84] Alexander Kondakov, «To Be Born a Feminist: An Essay on Feminst Thinking in Russia», *Oñati Socio-Legal Series* 2, no. 7, (2012):33-34, SSRN: https://ssrn.com/abstract=2195213, 38.
[85] A term used to describe youths in opposition to Soviet authority.

English feminists recommended her to read Engels' *The Origin of the Family,* which made her realise that the theories from the West was not intervening with Russian thinking to colonize it, rather it was an exchange of ideas regarding gender theory.[86]

The foundation of *The Peterburg Centre for Gender Issues* was opened in 1992 as a non-governmental organisation and was financed by Lipovskaya without any foreign assistance; it was later supported by a German women's rights foundation called *Frauen AnStiftung.* The centre provided a space for publication of books, research, conferences, seminars and organised public actions, cultural events, and exhibitions. They also published a review called "All Men are Sisters", which turned into a monthly newsletter; *Posidelki* (The Gatherings).[87] Feminist movements had the opportunity to flourish in the environment feminists such as Lipovskaya was forming, given the success of the Gender Centre. It would not last long, however, as authorities started to meddle. Because of their critical thinking, an activity not appreciated by Russian authorities in the 1990s, a sudden spark of interest for Gender Studies rose within state structures, which led to the foundation of a parallel structure called the "Department of Women's Studies". By the end of the late 1990s, Gender Studies was welcomed into state universities in Russia. Although this sounds like a positive trend, Lipovskaya claims that this was a case of formalism; a Soviet term for "when something is supposed to be, no matter what the quality is", as the people hired for these new programs, were unprofessional and incompetent. Eventually, the Centre's founding was cut in 2003, and eventually closed its doors in 2005 after Lipovskaya's failed attempts to find alternative spaces and financial aid from different foundations.[88]

In addition to the domesticated GONGOs (state sponsored NGOs), there was a problem of cultural appropriation. Vanya Mark Solovey adds an interesting approach to the discussion of Western influence in his chapter "'Global Standards' and 'Internalized Coloniality': How Feminists in Russia See the 'West'" in *Queering Paradigms VIII: Queer-Feminist Solidarity and the East/West Divide*. He criticised academics, who claim that feminism has failed in Russia, despite the existence of academic research on women's movement in Russia during the 1990's.[89] Lipovskaya and her colleagues are part of this contribution, and Solovey's criticism of Western academics, who exclude the hard work of feminist establishment and work in the

[86] Kondakov, «To Be Born a Feminist», 40-41.
[87] Ibid., 42.
[88] Ibid., 43-44.
[89] Vanya Mark Solovey, «'Global Standards' and 'Internalized Coloniality': How Feminists in Russia See the 'West'» in *Queering Paradigms VIII Queer-Feminist Solidarity and the East/West Divide,* ed. Kahtarina Wiedlack, Saltanat Shoshanova and Masha Godovannaya (Oxford, Peter Lang, 2020), DOI: 10.3726/b14797, 153.

1990s, is accurate and just. Academics who read Russia as a failed state for feminism are failing to remove their prejudice of the Russian culture, which is coloured by the authoritarian nature of the USSR and Putin's Russia. Solovey also debunked the mainstream critique that contemporary[90] feminism in Russia is a declining trend, and the representation of Russian feminism as a small group who promote Western values. He argues that the reason academia does not acknowledge the feminist movements in Russia, is grounded in the fact that feminism is regarded as an element of Western modernity. Subsequently, the idea of Russia lagging 'behind' fuels the mainstream approach to feminism as centred around Western values and ideas.[91]

To be sure, in legal terms, progress is needed. The term "lagging behind" is not an arrogant word to describe Russia's legal framework when it comes to women's rights; while there are organisations and academic spaces dedicated to the feminist cause, Russia is plagued with an epidemic of violence against women. As long as violence is socially accepted, and violent men are protected by Russian law, putting topics of sexism in daily life on the political and social agenda, will be less prioritised.

5.2 Domestic Violence in Russia

Violence of all sorts is a gigantic problem in Russia, and this includes domestic violence. The Moscow-based organisation *Nasiliu.net (No To Violence)* was founded as a response to an article the founder, Anya Rivina, read in 2015: "Твое истинное лицо" *(Your True Face).* The article is written by journalist Anna Zhavnerovich, about her own experience with violence by the hands of her ex-boyfriend. The article is quite detailed and horrifying to read, as she also attaches pictures of 'her true face', as her ex-boyfriend screamed after beating her face. In the introduction to the article, she emphasises that this treatment can occur in all relationships and that the shame victims feel keeps the violence to continue.[92] Rivina realised that this could happen to anyone and wondered why no one talked or wrote about this issue, which lead her to create an organisation which aims to help women in situations such as the tragic case of Zhavnerovich. *Nasiliu.net* are helping victims of domestic violence in several ways; by offering comprehensive help without bureaucratic obstacles as well as working with the aggressors of

[90] The chapter was published in 2020, and Russia cannot be read through the same lense as several changes has occoured since the invasion of Ukraine. I touch upon an updated feminist activism in Russia in 5.2 and onwards.
[91] Solovey, "'Global Standards' and 'Internalized Coloniality': How Feminists in Russia See the 'West'", 154.
[92] Anna Zhavnerovich, «Твое истинное лицо: Часть первая», *BOC,* August 16, 2015. https://w-o-s.ru/article/13906.

violence, who are seeking help and renounce violence.[93] The centre's effort to communicate with men who have contributed to the gendered violence in Russia could be the start of a broader public debate within Russian society, regarding men's perception of women, as men question their own feelings and why it leads to aggression, and why women are the victims of their aggression. Further, the centre provides legal advice and safe-haven accommodation for women who need to rethink their next steps in a calm environment; this includes *pro-bono* legal aid – the centre states on their website that they will contact the person seeking help to select a lawyer within one business day.[94] In addition to provide legal help and safety for domestic violence victims, their website also contain information about what qualifies as domestic violence.[95] This serves as a guideline for victims who struggle with a sense of shame and downplay the violence they face.

Rivina was first introduced in the introduction of this thesis, in relation to TACC' article which debated whether the decriminalisation of domestic violence was justified. *Nasiliu.net* states that there is no law against domestic violence and that Russia is obliged by the Istanbul Convention to introduce legal amendments that protect women against violence.[96] Russia's High Commissioner of Human Rights, Tatyana Moskalkova, stated in 2018, that it was a mistake to 'soften' domestic violence laws and that Russia needs a new law to combat domestic abuse.[97] Five years later, nothing has changed, however, and as Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, convicted murderers of women are being pardoned by the Russian authorities by serving the Russian army in Ukraine for six months. Not only does the return of these convicted criminals predict a violent wave of rape and murders as more return to Russia, but the culture amongst men could also potentially turn more toxic, as they have witnessed war first hand and bring with them a 'crippled psyche'. This has already resulted in incidents in several parts of Russia, where women report harassment from men who mention their 'brave participation on the special mobilisation operation' while they random attack women on the street for not wanting to engage with them. It is not only convicted criminals in the Russian army who harass women,

[93] «О Центре «Насилию.нет»», *Nasiliu.net*, https://nasiliu.net/o-nas/.
[94] «Юридическая помощь», *Nasiliu.net*, https://nasiliu.net/yuridicheskaya-pomoshh/.
[95] «Что такое домашнее насилие?», *Nasiliu.net*, https://nasiliu.net/pronasilie/chto-takoe-domashnee-nasilie/.
[96] «Что такое домашнее насилие?», *Nasiliu.net*, https://nasiliu.net/pronasilie/chto-takoe-domashnee-nasilie/.
[97] George Steer, «Russian Human Rights Official Admits Softening Domestic Violence Laws Was 'a Mistake'», *TIME*, December 4, 2018, https://time.com/5470166/domestic-violence-russia/.

which suggest an early violent wave approaching Russia because of their military service, regardless of previous trauma or convictions.[98]

In addition to the plague of violence, women's reproduction rights are also threatened. Now, with the backing of Russia's low demographic due to a significant loss of troops, Patriarch Kirill once again lobbied for an abortion-ban in January 2023. He is not alone in his opinion regarding women's rights to bodily autonomy, as Mikhail Murashko, Russia's minister of health, condemns the encouragement of women to education and pursuing a career, thus wasting her childbearing age. He would prefer the opposite; encouraging girls from a young age to give birth before pursuing a career, as well as proposing a "strict control" of abortion drugs.[99]

It is safe to assume that the war in Ukraine is affecting women's rights negatively in Russia. As stated earlier, feminism as a movement cannot evolve while Russia is facing such a primitive issue such as murder and rape on a large scale. With the Orthodox Church lobbying for an abortion-ban relating to a declining demographic, the future looks bleak. However, I emphasise the efforts of Russian feminists as extremely important, as Russia is not a lost cause necessarily, in terms of framing a feminism through Russian culture. As mentioned earlier, it is a matter of formalism that certain 'feminist' organisations exist, as they do not dig deep in feminist issues, such as *Nasiliu.net* does, it is however noteworthy that they exist. Another example of formalism is the Russian celebration of International Women's Day, as the fact that it is a marked holiday, proves that feminism has played some part in the shaping of contemporary Russia. It did however turn out to mean something completely different from its origins, which the subchapter below will shed light on.

[98] Olesia Krivtsova, ««Права женщин в России в катастрофическом состоянии». Как война меняет жизнь женщин в России», *The Barents Observer,* August 23, 2023, https://thebarentsobserver.com/ru/2023/08/prava-zhenshchin-v-rossii-v-katastroficheskom-sostoyanii-kak-voyna-menyaet-zhizn-zhenshchin.
[99] Ibid.

5.3 International Women's Day in Russia

New waves of feminist activities and legal demands challenges the formalism of state-sponsored public holidays. The roots of the 8th of March pointed in a different direction; what started off as a socialist day of protest in the early 20th century, is now a holiday where women are put on a pedestal for a single day while being showered in flowers, champagne, and chocolate.

Clearly, early socialist feminism had little in common with Soviet formalism. The idea of celebrating women's fight for equality was introduced by German socialist Clara Zetkin in 1910 during the Second International Conference of Socialist Women, which purpose was to "promote Women's suffrage propaganda".[100] Alexandra Kollontai was also an attendee at this conference, where they constructed a template for policy recommendations Kollontai would later import to Russia in 1917.[101] The history behind the reason of the mark of the date March 8th is a vague and historians are not in agreement of why International Women's Day is celebrated on this specific day, it most likely has American ties to a mass meeting being held on March 8th in 1908 by the Branch Number 3 of the New York City Social Democratic Women's Society, yet the first International Women's Day was celebrated in Germany and Denmark on March 19 in 1911.[102] At the time of its first celebration in Russia in 1913, March 8 was the official date for IWD, yet it was celebrated on February 17 in Russia, as they were following the Julian calendar and the official date would fall on February 23. Its first official mark was earlier than what would officially be March 8 out of fear for police interference.[103] In 1914, the League for Women's Equal Rights were able to gain approval of a celebration of the Women's Day the Duma, after feminists had lobbied for its designation the year before.[104]

The February Revolution of 1917 was sparked by engagement surrounding the International Women's Day marked in St. Petersburg (then renamed as Petrograd) in 1914, as women workers were demonstrating in the streets of February 23rd in the name of equality. These women urged male workers to strike with them in factories and they threw snowballs and metal

[100] Rochelle Golberg Ruthchild, «From West to East: International Women's Day, the First Decade», *Aspasia* 6, no. 1, 2012, DOI: https://doi.org/10.3167/asp.2012.060102, 1.
[101] Ghoosee, *Red Valyries*, 59.
[102] Rochelle Golberg Ruthchild, «From West to East: International Women's Day », *Aspasia* 6, no. 1, 2012, DOI: https://doi.org/10.3167/asp.2012.060102, 3.
[103] Ibid., 6.
[104] Ibid., 7.

objects on the windows of the fabric to attract support and attention. Female conductors also joined them, causing disruption in transport, which further agitated the masses.[105]

This protest repertoire was familiar in larger strikes, and ironically, protests were of course orchestrated by men, using the IWD as a tool to gain sympathy for the socialist cause of feminists. The question of women's rights was not a priority planned for the 23rd of February in 1917, other than a general set of meetings, speeches, and leaflets. One of these leaflets, distributed by *Mezhraionnyi* (Inner-District) Committee on the International Women's Day, urged women to follow their male comrades in the proletariat, who had already initiated the revolution.[106]

As mentioned in *Chapter 4,* the socialist cause overplayed the feminist cause and female socialists supported this stand out of fear that excessive attention to women's issues would divide male socialists from promoting egalitarian values in the socialist cause. Zetkin had intentionally proposed the name "Women's Day" rather than "Women Worker's Day" as an attempt to separate women's issues from the proletariat.[107] The original aim of the commemoration for women's issues did not survive the February Revolution, as the day would officially recognized as "International Communist Women's Day" in 1921.[108] Later, in 1965, the celebration became an official holiday, which by then had become a great part of Soviet culture and celebration of its history.[109]

5.3.1 Flowers and Champagne

In post-communist Russia – or Putin's Russia, Russian women are still showered with flowers, chocolate, champagne, and other tokens of appreciation on March 8th. Russian women do not march in the streets, however. Although Russian's celebration differs from how the day is celebrated in other cultures across the world, the fact that Russians found their own way of marking the day is not necessarily a bad thing. It has become a part of Russian culture and florists certainly appreciate the monetary gain they earn from Russian men lining up in stores

[105] Ruthchild, "From West to East: International Women's Day, the First Decade", 11.
[106] Ibid., 11
[107] Ibid., 5.
[108] Ibid., 15.
[109] Mariya Mikhanteva, «День борьбы за равноправие и мир: история праздника 8 Марта», *Forbes,* March 8, 2022, https://www.forbes.ru/forbes-woman/458169-den-bor-by-za-ravnopravie-i-mir-istoria-prazdnika-8-marta.

around this holiday. It is also a public holiday, giving women (and men) a day off work, regardless of its original meaning.[110]

But with the rise of more contemporary feminist movements, the repertoire of celebration can also turn into a repertoire of contention. Feminist activists commemorate the day in the original nature of the holiday, such as Ekaterina Patyolina, who spent the day in protest in 2019. The demand was a law to protect women against domestic violence, as well as actions taken against workplace discrimination and the pay gap.[111] The same year Patyolina demonstrated in the name of women's rights, a group of men entered a feminist café with opening hours reserved to women-only entries, forcing flowers upon the women who appeared to enjoy a feminine space on a day historically intended for commemoration of women's struggles. The group of men were of the Pro-Kremlin group called "Network", who claimed they did not intend to provoke anyone.[112] The incident was also published by oil-tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky on X (then Twitter) with the caption "Real gentlemen don't leave when asked!" attached to a video of the men entering the café and clearly uncomfortable and displeased women (@khodorkovsky_en, March 8, 2019).[113] Khodorkovsky's post can be understood as a mockery of women who celebrate International Women's Day by marking the holiday in a feminist manner, rather than being showered in flowers and materialism.

President Putin is also an active contributor to the upkeeping of the tradition of celebrating women. As the holiday has certain roots in Russian culture, and as the Kremlin knows how important popular communication is for governance, it is a given that he graces the Russian people, or in this case women, with a speech. There might be several reasons for this. First, a society which celebrates women as a public holiday can promote itself as a progressive one, one where women are equal to men. Second, as mentioned earlier, giving women flowers and digestible treats is conceived as appropriate and is not a bad way to celebrate them. This does not mean that the state and the state-leader have any perception of the social implications of feminism. The issue lies with putting women on a pedestal, thereby objectifying them, and Putin deliberately uses the occasion to remind the population once again about birth rates and

[110] Patrick Reevell, «In Russia, International Women's Day means something totally different», *ABC News*, March 8, 2019, https://abcnews.go.com/International/russia-international-womens-day-means-totally/story?id=61556127.
[111] Galina Polonskaya, «8 марта в борьбе за женские права», *Euronews*, March 8, 2019, https://ru.euronews.com/2019/03/08/feminist-demo-in-moscow.
[112] «Pro-Kremlin Youth Group Barges Into Feminist Coffee Shop in St. Petersburg, with Flowers», *The Moscow Times*, March 8, 2019, https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/03/08/pro-kremlin-youth-group-barges-into-feminist-coffee-shop-in-st-petersburg-with-flowers-a64751.
[113] Mikhail Khodorkovsky, «Real gentlemen don't take leave when asked!», X-post (Earlier Twitter), March 8, 2019, https://twitter.com/khodorkovsky_en/status/1104003624152285186.

domestic duties. In his most recent Women's Day speech, in 2023, he thanked women for their devotion towards their children, ensuring the family is filled with love, comfort and harmony. He also thanked Russian women for their efforts in protecting the Motherland and their qualities they contribute to varied professions.[114]

To exemplify this: his choice of words in his 2023 speech is illustrative. He started out by suggesting that the holiday, albeit celebrated all over the world, was celebrated in a manner that stood out from the rest of the world:

> […] This holiday is celebrated in many countries, but for Russia it is always filled with special warmth and meaning, the kindest, brightest, most sincere feelings, because a sublime, respectful attitude towards women and motherhood is an unconditional value for us, passed on from generation to generation.[115]

He even added a tint of romanticism, by suggesting that the Russian people were the conveyer of traditions that went from generation to generation:

> […] Today, in all the cities and towns of our big country, they talk about love and admiration for mothers, grandmothers, sisters, wives, daughters, girlfriends, they strive to please their dearest and closest ones, to hug, to say about what sometimes there is not enough time for in the everyday whirlwind of affairs, convey greetings and kind, sincere words to those who believe and are waiting at home, in a time of trials and separation.[116]

In an unusual turn, he also praised female soldiers, using words that emphasised them as protectors of *Родина,* which translates to «Motherland». In the 2022 speech, he greeted Russian women for their loyalty to *Отечества*, which translates to «Fatherland». Later in the same speech, he proclaims that the words "Motherland", "mama", and "beloved" share the same meaning in our time.[117] Putin's focus on motherhood in the context of war could be conceived as unsettling, especially as women's reproductive rights are being questioned by Patriarch Kirill as well as the health minister, assisted by the low demography Russia is facing due to soldiers not returning home from the war.[118] Paradoxically, the war against Ukraine was not mentioned with one single word.

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[114] Putin, Vladimir V., «Поздравление российским женщинам с 8 Марта», Putin's speech on International Women's Day, March 8, 2023, http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70649.
[115] Putin, Vladimir V., «Поздравление российским женщинам с 8 Марта», Putin's speech on International Women's Day, March 8, 2023, http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70649.
[116] Putin, Vladimir V., «Поздравление российским женщинам с 8 Марта», Putin's speech on International Women's Day, March 8, 2023, http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70649.
[117] Putin, Vladimir V., «Поздравление российским женщинам с 8 Марта», Putin's speech on International Women's Day, March 8, 2022, http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67937.
[118] Olesia Krivtsova, ««Права женщин в России в катастрофическом состоянии». Как война меняет жизнь женщин в России», *The Barents Observer,* August 23, 2023, https://thebarentsobserver.com/ru/2023/08/prava-zhenshchin-v-rossii-v-katastroficheskom-sostoyanii-kak-voyna-menyaet-zhizn-zhenshchin.

Contemporary Russian feminists are, of course, aware of the fact that linking women to motherhood both harm and objectify women. At the same time, they seek to avoid the trap of contrasting domestic rights with that of equality rights in professional pursuits. Early feminisms alienated masses of women by stating that raising children imprisoned women and linked them to domestic responsibilities, thereby making them unable to compete in male-dominated work spheres. Single mothers and mothers of poor families shied away from such feminist demonisation and chose family over participation in the work force.[119] Although this was alienating for some, it is understandable that early feminists proclaimed this philosophy.

However, romanticizing motherhood implies that a woman's true calling in life is to be a mother is superior to those who choose a childless life, doomed to live her life in unfulfillment.[120] This way of perceiving feminism is not too far from Putin's soft weaponization of motherhood on the International Women's Day, as he romanticizes motherhood and praises women for their maternal contribution to Russian society, thereby reducing women to their biology. On the one hand, his sole mention of motherhood and its relation to "Motherland" and "beloved" is not aggressive, especially as he mentions female soldiers and female workers in the same speeches. On the other hand, in the choice of words associated with pride and the desire to be loved, Putin solicits support, but does not mention core issues of violence. A TACC report stated that the number of rape cases went up by 72 percent in 2020 alone.[121] Moreover, while Putin in 2023 mentioned female medical personnel and thanking their efforts to battle the COVID-19 pandemic, no words were spent to target the epidemic of domestic violence that accompanied the pandemic. Violence rose as families were isolated during the pandemic of COVID-19, and women who broke quarantine to escape their abuser, were fined. True, the government eventually recognized domestic violence as a valid reason to break quarantine in May 2020.[122]

On a final note, the isolation also made abortions critically difficult to gain access to as non-emergency abortions were not prioritised as an essential medical treatment at the time, according to an Amnesty International- report from December 2022.[123][124] Certainly, feminism

[119] bell hooks, *Feminist Theory*, 134-135.
[120] Ibid., 135-136.
[121] «Число изнасилований в России выросло на 72% в январе», *TASS*, February 28, 2020, https://tass.ru/proisshestviya/7861729.
[122] Amnesty International Ukraine, «Eastern Europe and Central Asia: Protect Women from Violence in Crises and Beyond», *Amnesty International*, December 8, 2022, https://eurasia.amnesty.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/eastern-europe-and-central-asia.-protect-women-from-violence-in-crises-and-beyond.pdf, 14.
[123] Ibid., 19.
[124] Amnesty International, «Eastern Europe and Central Asia: Lack of protection against domestic violence exacerbated by crises and 'traditional values' – new report», *Amnesty International*, December 14, 2022, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/12/eastern-europe-and-central-asia-lack-of-protection-against-domestic-violence-exacerbated-by-crises-and-traditional-values-new-report/.

cannot grow where the culture is plagued by violence and misogyny, poisoned by the embodiment of masculinity and ignorance, Vladimir Putin. Although he is not the only person to blame for the misogyny Russian culture allows to define it, the personality cult surrounding him while representing Russia lends a very helping hand.

5.4 Putin's Chokehold on Russia

Valerie Sperling has provided solid evidence that the society Putin has created in his twenty-three years as leader of Russia, either as President or Prime Minister, has been a masculine project. This contrasts in one way with the preceding period, but it has also gained impetus, and can be conceived as a cult. Sperling suggests that masculinity is comprised of both bodily metaphors, but it is also detached from the male body. Masculinity is recreated through actions and words, which Putin is no stranger to.[125]

Sperling's analysis finds resonance in the words of social scientists Tatiana Ribanova and Oleg Ribanov; they break down what masculinity means in contemporary Russia by analysing the embodiment of *muzhik*, which is derived from the Russian word for «man»- *мужчина.* It has its origins from a trope of the Soviet Era, depicting a male peasant, with the negative stereotypes the USSR did not appreciate at the time, such as being ignorant, backward, and perhaps also counterrevolutionary, alas not a communist. *Muzhik* was originally a negative term, as it represented what the Soviet society saw as "backward", given that the ideal man was an intellectual or an industrial worker.[126]

As the USSR crumbled, the West brought new ideas the Russian society did not necessarily appreciate or could assimilate. In contrast to "liberal" men from the West, the term *Muzhik* signalled self-sufficient, anti-communist attitudes, but also resistance against political correctness. A *muzhik* is also strong, hardy and a patriot ready to defend his Motherland. In many ways, Putin's external image, presented in international media as well as local, Russian media, has become the embodiment of this trope. He is not afraid to be frank in his statements and is portrayed shirtless while performing his masculinity through fishing, shooting wild animals, and demonstrating his martial arts- skills.[127] Although there is more to Putin's political

[125] Sperling, *Sex, Politics, and Putin,* 164.
[126] Ibid., 72-73.
[127] Ibid., 74-75.

legitimacy than this public display of masculinity, it has been very effective on the Russian population.

In 2002, a song was published by Nicolai Gastello, a government employee in charge of the press division of the national courts of Russia, and musician Alexander Yelin, who named the song "A Man Like Putin". The song narrates a boyfriend who behaves poorly, getting into fights and doing drugs, causing the woman to break up with him and raises her standards for a man like Putin. The description of Putin portrays him as a strong man who does not drink and will not leave her, the opposite of the "gopnik"[128] ex-boyfriend. This song became so popular that it rose to the top of the pop charts in Russia.[129] As this song was written by a man in charge of the press division of the national courts, it is safe to assume that this was a part of Putin's campaign to political legitimacy, once again using his masculinity to assert dominance within the popular culture in Russia.

Sperling emphasises that Putin is a representation of hegemonic masculinity in Russia, and that his PR-stunts to showcase his masculinity is a result of a risky legitimisation strategy, as it leaves Putin and the Kremlin open to constant demands to prove that his masculinity is intact. This strategy is risky for several reasons: First, it leaves interpretation open to his opponent, who could threaten his hegemony. Second, Putin is no longer a young man, and this was put into question in 2012, when he was sixty years old, it was suggested to rebrand him as a 'wise patriarch', but this suggestion was abandoned as Putin had upcoming photoshoots.[130]

5.5 Feminism in times of war

As mentioned in *Chapter 2,* the cultural framework which allows Putin to use his masculinity as a vehicle of power, rests on sexism being normalised within Russian society and culture. If feminism was accepted into the culture, this could weaken Putin's political legitimacy, and this again explains why the strategy used by the Kremlin is so fragile. Part of this strategy entails to constantly break down potential threats when they gain popularity.

This part of Putin's masculine image plays out in the public debate more openly than before. Masculinity fuses with resentment of Western ideas, as the statements of State Duma member Oleg Matveychev following the death of military blogger Vladlen Tatarsky, evidence; he

[128] A «gopnik» is a derogatory word used to describe petty criminals in post-Soviet suburbs from low-income households.
[129] Sperling, *Sex, Politics, and Putin,* 76-77.
[130] Ibid., 80-81.

argued that Russian feminists are agents of the West and planted to undermine traditional values. He also stated that feminism must be recognized as an extremist ideology.[131] His aggression towards feminism played out in the context of Tatarsky's death. A feminist and anti-war activist, Daria Trepova, was accused of the murder, as she was the one who presented Tatarsky with the gift containing explosive material. When the bomb went off, it also wounded forty others who were present at the café in St. Petersburg.

The event cannot be seen detached from the invasion. Russian authorities linked Trepova to Ukrainian intelligence and to Alexey Navalny, claiming that she acted on orders from them.[132] The political framing of the event (we cannot be sure that Trepova knew the content of the gift she was asked to bring), simultaneously weakens Russian feminist activism, as it associates them with violence. Feminists are in general against the war, however. The feminist group *Феминисткое антивоенное сопротивление (Feminist Anti-War Resistance) (FAR)* wrote a manifesto regarding Russia's invasion of Ukraine, in which they condemned war; the manifesto was translated by Anastasia Kalk and Jan Surman and published on Jacobin:

> […] War means violence, poverty, forced displacement, broken lives, insecurity, and the lack of a future. It is irreconcilable with the essential values and goals of the feminist movement. War exacerbates gender inequality and sets back gains for human rights by many years. War brings with it not only the violence of bombs and bullets but also sexual violence: as history shows, during war, the risk of being raped increases several times for any woman. For these and many other reasons, Russian feminists and those who share feminist values need to take a strong stand against this war unleashed by the leadership of our country.[133]

In this manifesto, FAR takes clear distance from violence. As such, the manifesto reveals how contentious feminist action can defuse statements like that of State Duma member Matveychev regarding feminist acts and extremism. It also illustrates how the Law against extremism is being used to target larger segments in society. The Duma politician clearly also weaponizes "traditional values" against protesters. FAR does not fail to articulate exactly how these 'traditional values' are nothing but glossy words to justify inequality and upholding Putin's political legitimacy:

> […] The current war, as Putin's addresses show, is also fought under the banner of the "traditional values" declared by government ideologues — values that Russia allegedly decided to promote throughout the

[131] Anna Sherbakova, «Феминизм захотели признать экстремистской идеологией после убийства Татарского», *Lenta*, April 4, 2023, https://lenta.ru/news/2023/04/04/feminizmm/.
[132] «Court Extends Russian Cafe Bombing Suspect's Detention», *The Moscow Times*, August 25, 2023, https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/08/25/court-extends-russian-cafe-bombing-suspects-detention-a82245.
[133] Feminist Anti-War Resistance, "Russia's Feminists Are in the Streets Protesting Putin's War", *Jakobin*, February 27, 2022, https://jacobin.com/2022/02/russian-feminist-antiwar-resistance-ukraine-putin.

> world as a missionary, using violence against those who refuse to accept them or hold other views. Anyone who is capable of critical thinking understands well that these "traditional values" include gender inequality, exploitation of women, and state repression against those whose way of life, self-identification, and actions do not conform with narrow patriarchal norms. The justification of the occupation of a neighbouring state by the desire to promote such distorted norms and pursue a demagogic "liberation" is another reason why feminists throughout Russia must oppose this war with all their energy.[134]

The manifesto also encourages feminists all over the world to join their cause as well as joining peaceful protests and publish with their hashtag "#FeministAntiWarResistance" and "#FeministsAgainstWar". They also ask that readers share the manifesto, to emphasise that feminists are against the war in Ukraine and to demonstrate that there are Russian activists ready to oppose Putin's regime. But due to persecution of Russian activists, the members of the initiative are anonymous for security reasons.[135] FAR represents a Russian feminist group, mobilising to resist the war on Ukraine as well as an active initiative to oppose Russian authorities, and their manifesto has carefully articulated why they call their group 'feminist'. However, as they are forced to stay anonymous, creating a spectacle around their activism in Russia is limited to the aid of Western media outlets to spread their cause and use English hashtags to reach a bigger audience.

FAR represents a case of domestic contentious politics. The following chapter will explore how feminist activism, popularised by Western media, mobilise to oppose Russian authorities from abroad. It covers the cases of Pussy Riot-members Nadya Tolokonnikova and Masha Alyokhina and their activism in Russia and how they are protesting Putin in exile, as well as the case of Kira Yarmysh, who is also protesting in exile. These protesters all have biographies that have fronted feminism domestically, and hence, they are relevant for the analysis.

[134] Feminist Anti-War Resistance, "Russia's Feminists Are in the Streets Protesting Putin's War", *Jakobin*, February 27, 2022, https://jacobin.com/2022/02/russian-feminist-antiwar-resistance-ukraine-putin.
[135] Ibid.

Chapter Six

6.0 (Feminist) Activism under Putinism: Pussy Riot and Kira Yarmysh

Activism is dependent on media exposure to have any effect. For this reason, being an activist in Russia has never been easy as the Russian media is for the most part run by the Kremlin or friends of the Kremlin. In the past, independent media outlets were widely available for Russians, such as *Дождь (TV Rain), Эхо Москвы (Echo of Moscow)* and *Новая Газета (Novaya Gazeta)*. Even though they still exist, I speak of them in past tense as they are currently being silenced due to a law criminalising critique of Russian military in Ukraine, which in turn limits the independent media's freedom of speech, as they also face potential

dangers by criticising the Russian government.[136] Several journalists fled from Russia after the passing of this law, fearing what might come next.[137]

The trend of emigration is not only limited to journalists, as several activists left Russia in 2022. Of course, there are other factors that lead people to leave their country, but the curtailment of freedom of speech makes it dangerous for anti-war and anti-Kremlin activists to stay in Russia for the time being. Although the law concerning free speech reached new hights of infringement of human rights, activists were already being persecuted by the state, using vague laws against them. For example, according to Article 149. of The Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, holding a demonstration or participating one in Russia without the approval of the government is punishable by up to three years in prison or a fine up to 300 thousand roubles or in the wage or salary, or any income of the convicted person for two years.[138] Article 149 represents the vagueness of Russian laws as participating in a demonstration representing values which Russian authorities does not approve of, making it impossible to legally participate in a demonstration with any meaning in Russia. Therefore, within the frames of vague laws, activism was difficult before, while new laws make it impossible to being able to safely perform activism in Russia. As mentioned in the former chapter, feminism is getting closer links to extremism, further limiting feminist discourse in Russia. Because of the restriction of freedom

[136] Anton Troianovsky, Valeriya Safronova, «Russia Takes Censorship to New Extremes, Stifling War Coverage», *The New York Times*, March 4, 2022, (Updated May 18, 2022), https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/04/world/europe/russia-censorship-media-crackdown.html.
[137] Ibid.
[138] Кодекс Российской Федерации от 13.06.1996 г. № 63-ФЗ, http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/9555/page/16.

of speech, activists are dependent on Western leverage, not only to get their work published, but also to pay for basic human needs such as housing, safety, and food.[139]

The following subchapters deals with the cases of two members of activist collective Pussy Riot; Nadya Tolokonnikova and Masha Alyokhina, and the case of Kira Yarmysh. These women have in common that they participated in demonstrations against Putin and the Kremlin. Their approaches to activism are vastly different, but they all faced criminal charges due to their activism and served time in Russian prisons. I will focus on their depictions of how women are treated in Russian prisons and the feminist topics of their literary works. The literature of Pussy Riot members is somewhat outdated, as Nadya Tolokonnikova's *Read & Riot: A Pussy Riot Guide to Activism* was published in 2018 and Masha Alyokhina's *Riot Days* was published in 2017. Russia has since changed for the worse regarding human rights, which becomes clear in *Incredible Events in Women's Cell no. 3,* the debut novel of Kira Yarmysh. Her novel was published in Russian in 2020 and was made available to an international audience in 2022 as it was published in English and other languages. It provides the readers with a unique insight to ordinary Russian female offenders and their experiences of being deprived of their freedom and basic human needs, such as showering. The literature of Pussy Riot also touches on their experience in Russian prisons, especially Alyokhina, but most of all, the literature talks about the events and days leading up to their notorious Punk Prayer, leading to their arrest. Before I review the literature of these activists, I will introduce Pussy Riot as an international concept and the Russian discourse surrounding them.

6.1 The Thrilling Case of Pussy Riot

2012 marks the most important event in the activist career of Pussy Riot, as this was when they started receiving international attention. Specifically, on the 21st of February, five women of this art collective, walked into Cathedral of Christ the Saviour[140] with the intention of protesting against the relationship between the Orthodox Church and the Kremlin. The media in the West reported the incident as a protest against Putin, while the reception within the Russian population would suggest otherwise, as Patriarch Kirill saw this as an opportunity to portray the performance as an attack not only on the Orthodox Church, but also on the Russian

[139] Anton Troianovsky, Valeriya Safronova, «Last Vestiges of Russia's Free Press Fall Under Kremlin Pressure», *The New York Times,* March 3, 2022, (Updated March 4, 2022), https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/03/world/europe/russia-ukraine-propaganda-censorship.html.
[140] Marina Yusupova, «Pussy Riot: A Feminist Band Lost in History and Translation», *Nationality Papers* 42, no. 4, DOI: 10.1080/00905992.2014.923391, 605.

statehood, which was not a strange association, as the performance did offend Orthodox Christians in Russians, who associate their religion to their national identity. The Patriarch called upon the Russian people to pray for their faith and fatherland in response to the performance.[141] His announcement was not surprising, as the lyrics Pussy Riot sang in the cathedral consisted of offensive vocabulary as well as directly offending Patriarch Kirill by questioning his faith and criticising the Church regarding their relationships with authoritarian politicians, referring to Vladimir Putin and his associates.[142] With this simple performance, both national and international fame was secured; it was a formative event, and one that gave the protest biographies of the group a flying start.

6.1.1 Creation of Pussy Riot

The reception in the media matters, as it forms a narrative of these women regardless of their original intent of the Punk Prayer. Masha Gessen contributes a unique insight in *Words Will Break Cement: The Passion of Pussy Riot* on how the art collective started, as they[143] were able to interview the members Nadya Tolokonnikova, Masha Alyokhina and Ekaterina Samoutsevich (Kat), and their romantic partners and family members. The book was published in 2014, and Russia has since changed for the worse, however, the interviews provide insight to the feminist narrative in the protest biographies I will analyse below in 6.2 and 6.3.

Pussy Riot is the product of women who wanted to create an activist group made of women, as some of the founding members, Nadya and Kat, were members of *Voina*, which was an art collective, founded by Oleg Vorotnikov and Tolokonnikova's ex-husband, Petya Verzilov.[144] Together with their wives, they created provocative and political art. A noticeable performance done by the art collective was the action "Fuck for the Heir Puppy Bear"[145], where five couples had sex in a Biology Museum and filmed it. The act took place on February 29 in 2008 and was a protest against the presidency of Dmitry Medvedev, implying that he was a puppet in Putin's political scheme and that he was holding the seat warm for him while he waited to 'legally' return to presidency.[146]

[141] Associated Press in Moscow, "Russians rally support for Orthodox church over Pussy Riot controversy", *The Guardian,* March 6, 2012, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/apr/22/russians-support-orthodox-church-pussy-riot.
[142] Nadya Tolokonnikova's translation of the Punk Prayer. See appendix ii for full text.
[143] Masha Gessen is publicly non-binary, for this reason, I will refer to them with they/them pronouns.
[144] Masha Gessen, *Words Will Break Cement: The Passion of Pussy Riot,* (London: Granta Books, 2014), 34.
[145] In Russian, медведь (*medved')* means bear, making the art title a word play with Medvedev's name.
[146] Gessen, *Words Will Break Cement,* 40.

One can say that their method of protest was creative, as was the act they performed as a reaction to Medvedev's decision to rename the Russian police from the Soviet *militsiya* to *politsiya,* to humanise the police officers and turn Russia further away from their Soviet past. *Voina* decided to smother the police officers with 'love' to test if the name transformation had any effect. I put 'love' in quotation, as the act did not symbolize their intention. They called this *Buss the Buzz* and was carried out by asking police officers for directions and based on their response, they would kiss the police officers. It became a female project by accident, as *Voina* wanted to make the interactions same sex, which was easier carried out by the women of the group, than the men. Due to the focus on women in the art performance, they released the video on International Women's Day, March 8, 2011. The reception of the video, which went viral, was both negative and positive. The focus on the negative was due to the physical interactions seemed non-consensual. Samoutsevich later debunked this, claiming it seemed non-consensual due to bad editing.[147]

Gessen writes that Tolokonnikova was taught by queer theory and feminist theory that they needed to do things differently. *Voina* was founded by men and their protest methods were dependent on and aided by their wives. Both Tolokonnikova and Samoutsevich agreed that their art should be easily understood. They longed for a feminist movement in Russia, represented by groups such as Riot Grrrl[148] in the USA, or any kind of twentieth-century feminism in its cultural background.[149] This statement is based on assumptions that Russia has no significant feminist background, which is partly true, as they are referring to a feminism with updated terms. As *Chapter 4 and Chapter 5* showed, Russia (and the USSR) has feminist roots, but they have since withered. Their longing for a feminist movement was based on something that used to be, and showed promise, until cultural norms in Russia turned conservative and silenced the independent organisations whose values correlated with feminism.

Based on the international media coverage post-punk prayer, one would think Pussy Riot as a group represent the feminists of Russia. For some, this might be the case, but during her fieldwork for *Sex, Politics and Putin,* Valerie Sperling interviewed several feminists in Moscow and St. Petersburg not long after the fateful punk prayer in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, to understand what Pussy Riot represented for them. Her focus under conversations regarding

[147] Gessen, *Words Will Break Cement,* 58-59.
[148] Riot Grrrl is an American underground feminist punk movement from the 1990's, which inspired many young women to involve themselves in politics and challenge systematic sexism. The movement also provided a space for women who felt outcasted by society.
[149] Gessen, *Words Will Break Cement,* 60.

Pussy Riot with her respondents, was the language used by the group in their songs, as the lyrics often portrayed sexist and homophobic language with the intention of 'degrading' Putin. Sperling points out that Pussy Riot has failed to position themselves as feminist. There are a few examples of why; the song *Osvobodi bruschatku* use lyrics about bondage-and-domination to portray a change of power with the lyrics "It's never too late to become a dominatrix" and "The policeman [politseiskii (male)] licks you between your legs". As the feminist activits Natalia Bitten points out, this is embracing the idea of sexual objectification. Just because the roles are reversed, should one still wish to be the same as the oppressor? To want power over someone else, is not feminism.[150] But Pussy Riot continued to make music and music videos with similar narratives, such as their music video for *CHAIKA,* where Tolokonnikova is portrayed as a prison guard with other group members dressed in the same uniforms, show male prisoners in run down prisons and mattress-less beds being tortured by Tolokonnikova and the other group members.[151] Although the point of the video is to express Russian prisons breaking human rights, the torture portrayed in the video done by female guards against male prisoners is still a representation of violence, however one tries to twist the narrative.

Sperling interviewed seventeen women after the three women Tolokonnikova, Alyokhina and Samoutsevich were arrested after the punk prayer in 2012. Several of them emphasised Pussy Riot's link to the performance art group *Voina,* meaning 'war' in Russian, and their embracement of violence rather than a peaceful, feminist rhetoric. In response to opinions such as these, Tolokonnikova wrote in *Read and Riot: A Pussy Riot Guide to Activism* that she learned from prison that being nice to those who hold power over you do not work. This lesson came from a conversation with the head of her prison where she asked for shorter workdays and got punished in response. She goes on to state that she also learned that sometimes there is "no other option than showing your teeth and going on the warpath".[152] This point of view explains the further activism and art produced by Pussy Riot since they were released from prison. Their latest art performance, with Tolokonnikova in the front, goes by the name *Putin's Ashes,* which name itself is violent. Despite the violent encouragement the title represents, the support they receive online is overwhelming. Their YouTube videos might be banned in Russia, but that does not keep Russians from watching their videos and leaving comments of support.[153]

[150] Sperling, *Sex, Politics, and Putin,* 349-351.
[151] Pussy Riot, «Pussy Riot – CHAIKA (Official Music Video», YouTube video, February 3, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VakUHHUSdf8
[152] Nadya Tolokonnikova, *Read and Riot: A Pussy Riot Guide to Activism,* (New York: HarperOne, 2018), 160-161.
[153] Pussy Riot, «Pussy Riot - Putins Ashes (Official Short Film)», YouTube, January 27, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ni_CRPAw_5Q

Tolokonnikova was interviewed on the occasion of being placed on the list of Russia's Most Wanted, as a consequence of the art performance *Putin's Ashes,* and answers that her job for the last fifteen years has been to hurt Vladimir Putin as much as she humanly can, and that her instrument of war is her art. In the same video, she points out that he might be afraid and reminds her audience of the groups song prior to their arrest in 2012, where they sing "Putin has pissed himself", thereby emasculating him. She goes on to say that her family members in Russia are being harassed by the police because of her actions abroad, yet she states that Putin cannot understand a normal conversation, he understands only strength.[154] Based on her earlier performances, such as *Voina's* performance of entering the Moscow metro with the intention of kissing female police officers and filming it, not much has changed about their approach to art and activism. Both Tolokonnikova and Samutsevich participated in this performance, which was critiqued by the Moscow Feminist Group, stating it had nothing to do with feminism. They explain the stunt as an effort to fight the regime with symbolism, but they failed by using patriarchal language, which in this case can be understood as rape. Rape in the context of war is an attack to hurt the opponent, which in this case would be the female police officers. Sperling points out that by doing so, they force the policewomen to participate in their attack on the states masculine responsibility to protect its women.[155] Due to Pussy Riot's link to performances like those mentioned above, some Russian feminists are sceptical to the sincerity of Pussy Riot's approach to the feminist movement.

Marina Yusupova opens her essay *Pussy Riot: A Feminist Band Lost in History and Translation* by stating that the Pussy Riot story was the story the West *wanted* to hear. As the West celebrated these women for publicly screaming their hatred for Putin, Russian people were confused by the performance. Yusupova notes that the right to riot in Russia has been, and still is for the men, therefore the sight of wild women in a famous Orthodox Church screaming for Mother Mary to become a feminist and chase away Putin, was not a comfortable sight to say the least. She includes a survey done shortly after the announcement of the two-year sentence the women faced consequently, which illustrates how Russians in 2013 saw the group and their performance. 78 percent saw the two-year sentence as a light punishment, while 2 percent did not see actions such as this as a punishable crime.[156] This leads her to question what the West does not understand about Russia and vice versa, as Pussy Riot named Western feminists as

[154] Pussy Riot, «Nadya Pussy Riot on her new criminal case: My instrument of war against Putin is my art / MSNBC», YouTube, February 23, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TSnNH2iyixo&t=2s.
[155] Sperling, *Sex, Politics, and Putin*, 353-54.
[156] Marina Yusupova, "Pussy Riot: A Feminist Band Lost in History and Translation*", Nationality Papers* 42, no.4, (July 2014):604-610, DOI: 10.1080.00905992.2014.923391, 605.

their inspirations; Emmeline Pankhurst, Simone de Beauvoir, Andrea Dworkin, Kate Millett, Rosi Braidotti, Shaluma Firestone, and Judith Butler. Yusupova visualises the lack of concurrence between Pussy Riot's philosophical role models and Russia's relationship to feminism, through a FOM public opinion survey; approximately forty percent of Russians are not aware of the word 'feminism' and amongst this group, twelve percent had negative associations with the word.[157] She argues that the reason Western feminism has not taken root in Russia, is partly due a lack of translations of feminist works, as well as a lack of references. For instance, Russian history does not cover the American Stonewall riot, which thereby excludes most Russians from a very important movement shaping Western feminism.[158] To conduct a meaningful protest, the four dimensions of protest must harmonise, the structure needs to correlate with culture and biography. Yusupova builds on this by arguing that a feminist protest has to take local history, culture and socio-political context seriously, and that the strategy should always be local, despite how empowering it must feel to be part of something international.[159] Although she is right about the context of history, culture and socio-politics must be taken seriously, Pussy Riot, who does not take these factors into consideration, speaks to an audience of Russians who also aspire to reach further than local change. Their method of protest relies heavily on art and creative ways of mobilising its members to create headlines, to attract their cause; which has always been to free Russia from Putin's chokehold. This is a reoccurring theme in Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina's protest biographies.

6.2 Nadya Tolokonnikova: Read & Riot: A Pussy Riot Guide to Activism

> *I was crying because I forgot that a prisoner may deserve love, and sympathy, and respect. And all those voices, in different ways and timbers, were strong enough to break through censorship, filling my cell with a beautiful activist choir.*[160]

This is a quote by Nadya Tolokonnikova in the chapter "Break out from prison" in *Read & Riot: A Pussy Riot Guide to Activism.* In this chapter, she describes the horrendous conditions she and her fellow prisoners were held in during her sentence in a penal colony in Mordovia. As the quote reads, she had forgotten about the humanity she deserved after being deprived of

[157] Yusupova, "Pussy Riot: A Feminist Band Lost in History and Translation*",* 606.
[158] Yusupova, «Pussy Rio: A Feminist Band Lost in History and Translationt», 607.
[159] Marina Yusupova, "Pussy Riot: A Feminist Band Lost in History and Translation*", Nationality Papers* 42, no.4, (July 2014):604-610, DOI: 10.1080.00905992.2014.923391, 608.
[160] Nadya Tolokonnikova, *Read & Riot: A Pussy Riot Guide to Activism,* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2018), 165.

her human basic needs, such as the ability to feel clean or being served food that was not waste from the slaughterhouse. Despite the lack of humanity, she acknowledges that she was in a place of privilege being a political prisoner, as it was made clear to her that if she was not Tolokonnikova, a famous political prisoner, she would have faced far more violence.[161] She also notes that the imprisonment made her protest even more powerful, this is pointed out in relation to how she realised how much can be achieved by not putting up with the terrible conditions she and her fellow inmates suffered in Mordovia. She refused to stay silent about the horrendous food they were served, and as a result, she received lamb ribs in another prison in Chelyabinsk. This luxury was handed to her thanks to an open letter, where Mordovia was mentioned and became internationally known.[162] The leverage Tolokonnikova holds is unique, she had a powerful presence even inside a Russian prison, due to her international fame. That is not to suggest that she did not suffer while serving time in prison, but it would be fair to point out her privilege compared to other, less famous criminals. Her prison sentence ended in a prison hospital, where she was able to wear comfortable pyjamas and was allowed to read, write, and paint whatever she wanted. She states this is because they did not want to hear her complaints anymore. She even got to practice with a band and went on tour with them to other facilities. This was all thanks to her hunger strike and her open letter, she states. Sadly, she later learned that everything she worked for in Mordovia, had been dismantled, which proves that the personal privileges she received was to keep one loud prisoner pleased to keep her quiet. She herself did not feel satisfied when she learned about the mistreatment of the remaining prisoners in Mordovia and other facilities she visited once she was released.[163]

6.2.1 Tolokonnikova on feminism

Regardless of what the audience might think of Pussy Riot, they managed to reach great levels of attention from Western media. As Tolokonnikova mentions herself, their arrest contributed to this media attention, but what are they protesting? Whether they are described as an art collective, band or simply ‘group’, the Western articles written about them never fail to include the word ‘feminist’ in their introduction,[164] which brings up the question of what makes them a feminist collective? As mentioned in *Chapter 2*, the lack of an agreement among feminists

[161] Tolokonnikova, *Read & Riot,* 153.
[162] Ibid., 167.
[163] Ibid., 168-170.
[164] Dana Goodyear, «Watching Putin Burn with Pussy Riot», *New Yorker*, February 6, 2023, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/02/13/watching-putin-burn-with-pussy-riot

regarding the definition of the term itself, anyone can call themselves feminist. The problem with this, is that any act can be labelled as a 'feminist' act. Luckily, Tolokonnikova herself dove into several feminist theorists, including bell hooks, to define feminism for herself.

In the beginning of her book, Tolokonnikova states that Pussy Riot was created out of confusion. Her fellow member, Kat, was invited to give a lecture of an event[165] and informed the organizers that the topic of their lecture would be "Punk Feminism in Russia". They later discovered that the topic did not exist, and as time was not on their side, they decided to invent punk feminism so they would have something to talk about. This is how their collective was formed, and their first song was "Kill the Sexist".[166] In her last chapter, "Rule No. 10: Be a (Wo)man", she declares what feminism means to her:

> Feminism is a liberating tool that can be used by male, female, transgender, transsexual, queer, agender, anybody. Feminism allows me to say: I behave how I like and how I feel, I deconstruct gender roles and play with them, I mix them up voluntarily. Gender roles are my palette, not my chains.[167]

Tolokonnikova humorously writes that part of the inspiration of Pussy Riot, was Archpriest Smirnov. His regard to feminism made the members fall of their chairs laughing while watching his YouTube sermons. One of his quotes states that women have advantages over men in Russian society, and that feminism deprives women of this. He states that feminism is a poison that makes people unhappy once it penetrates the minds of society and families. She critiques the Archpriest's take on 'women's advantages', writing that sexists are famous for claiming that putting a woman on a pedestal is helping them, when in reality the pedestal is about being a servant or a beautiful thing among other things.[168] Tolokonnikova's response to Smirnov's comments about women and feminism is understandable, as a powerful man such as himself could bring himself to undermine women to such a low status in society, is numbing, thus somewhat humorous. But his YouTube sermons are no laughing matter, as his comments made other feminists in Russia angry. Angry enough to crown him "Sexist of the Year" in 2019 after his statement that women are of a weaker mind than men.[169]

Pussy Riot consider themselves part of the third wave of feminism, a movement to deconstruct the concept of gender duality. Tolokonnikova and Pussy Riot does not agree with the "male/ woman" model, they see it differently; there are unlimited genders that do not follow the line

[165] It is unclear what this event was, it is never clarified in the book.
[166] Tolokonnikova, *Read & Riot,* 31-32.
[167] Ibid., 209.
[168] Ibid., 210.
[169] Maxim Edwards, «Priest wins online anti-prize for Russia's 'sexist of the year'», *Globalvoices*, March 9, 2020, https://globalvoices.org/2020/03/09/priest-wins-online-anti-prize-for-russias-sexist-of-the-year/.

between "male" and "female" poles.[170] She elaborates further that feminism is about discarding excessive expectations that are projected on people according to their gender and sexual role that they are expected to perform. It is also about understanding genealogy and history of every gender role that is prescribed to a person. It is also about freedom of choice and having informed options.[171]

She discovered feminism at eight years old and immediately decided to identify as one, as it just made sense for her. Ten years later, she discovered Simone de Beauvoir, and her theory gave Tolokonnikova hope. Queer theory was introduced to her through American philosopher Judith Butler.[172] It is not stated how she discovered the phenomenon of feminism at eight years old, but a common influence was Western philosophy after the age of eighteen. Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler are both great contributions to feminist theory, one can even describe Beauvoir as a pioneer in terms of feminist theory. Yet, their theory is based on a Western society in a time the people of the Soviet Union was isolated from said society. The society in which Butler's theories on gender was developed also differs greatly from what Russians are familiar with, thus, the theories Tolokonnikova bases her perception of feminism on, are not one put into a Russian context.

Tolokonnikova also makes sure to include men in her chapter *Be a (Wo)Man*, to emphasise how important and beneficial the effect of feminism is to everyone. She quotes bell hooks' famous words that "feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression" and emphasises that the men who are too tough to express human emotions would benefit from feminism. Russian men have mandatory military service, while women do not, and Tolokonnikova highlights how unfair this is. A *real man* is expected to shoot and fight.[173] The critique of the inequality between men and women in Russia is an important contribution to the question of feminism in Russia. The *real man* Tolokonnikova critiques here correlates with Valerie Sperling's *muzhik* in relation to Putin's legitimation strategy. The *muzhik* now signifies what a real man should be in Russia. Further, to be a *muzhik*, is constant proof of not being a woman, a child, nor a homosexual.[174] The representation of men and the stereotype *muzhik* is vital for feminism not to plant any roots in a country where the president actively disrespect half the population, yet Tolokonnikova recognises that women also play a part in the

[170] Tolokonnikova, *Read & Riot,* 212.
[171] Ibid., 213.
[172] Ibid., 215.
[173] Ibid., 216.
[174] Sperling, *Sex, Politics, and Putin,* 73.

maintenance of misogyny and does not blame the women who vote for Putin. They feel uneasy and long for a strong hand from generations of women before them being reliant on men for survival.[175]

6.3 Masha Alyokhina: Riot Days

Here's a woman who won't see her son for another three years.[176]

Another well-known member of Pussy Riot wrote this in her prison memoir, *Riot Days.* Masha Alyokhina, together with Nadya Tolokonnikova were sentenced to two years in prison for their protest in Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in 2012. At the time, Alyokhina had a young son, who the prosecutors used against her to make her give up the identities of other members of the group.[177] This is one of many occurrences where she highlights the violence police and prison guards use against female criminals, as the psychological violence used against Alyokhina in the case with her son is not unusual to break down their spirit, especially those who are arrested for political causes. This memoir touches on Alyokhina's personal experience in penal colonies, the life between the protest and her arrest and the treatment of her fellow inmates.

Alyokhina commences the book by connecting the darkness of autumn to Putin announcing that he would run for a third presidential term. In her own words: "they were led by a belief in the possibility of change".[178] The relationship between the Patriarch and the returned President sparked something in Pussy Riot. They had been active in several minor protests earlier, but as it became clearer that this relationship would turn Russia further authoritarian[179], they wanted to perform something that people would talk about. Alyokhina contemplated about the religious aspect of their performance in a church the closer they came to the day of the performance, 21st of February 2012, at 9 AM. She questioned her right to go through with it, keeping in mind the reactions and consequences that might follow.[180] After the 'punk prayer' performance, the women ran away after being escorted out of the church. They discussed among themselves whether they should post the short video of their performance, as they didn't consider the quality to inspire confidence. In the end, they posted the video.

[175] Tolokonnikova, *Read & Riot,* 217.
[176] Maria Alyokhina, *Riot Days,* (Great Britain: Allen Lane, 2016), 167.
[177] Ibid., 52.
[178] Ibid., 3.
[179] Ibid., 14.
[180] Ibid., 19.

The day after they uploaded the video to YouTube, two police officers waited for Alyokhina outside her apartment, insisting she sign a paper to confirm she would come see them the following day. After she signed, the group decided to stay in hiding while they gave interviews to foreign news agencies, such as Al Jazeera. In the interview, they insisted they did not cause any harm or trouble upon anyone, that their performance was rather a criticism of the Church institution and contemporary Russia. Alyokhina then asks herself- who were they trying to convince?[181] She is right to ask herself this question, even before she saw the worldwide consequences, both negative and positive. Their method of protest is art, which Tolokonnikova has made clear in her book *Read & Riot: A Pussy Riot Guide to Activism.* Their choice of location is part of their art performance, as their critique of contemporary Russia is deeply linked to the relationship between the Orthodox Church and Kremlin. Alyokhina also calls the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour 'Pussy Riot Church' to take away the spiritual aspects of the church, given that she sees it as a place where no one is equal any longer.[182]

Although Alyokhina's memoirs does not clearly state any feminist declaration, her continued collaboration with Pussy Riot suggests that she agrees with the statements of Tolokonnikova, as they work closely together in their continued protest to free Russia from Putin.

6.4 Kira Yarmysh: The Incredible Events in Women's Cell No. 3

Kira Yarmysh' novel is categorised as political fiction, as it written through the eyes of the main character Anya, who has been arrested for protesting corruption in Moscow. For this criminal offence, she got sentenced to ten days spent in a detention cell, which already highlights the ridiculousness of the demonstration laws in Russia. She shares her cell with five other women, Maya, Katya, Natasha, Diana, and Ira, who all serve time for small criminal offences. Even though none of them were arrested for violent crimes, Anya has an irrational fear of them, which manifests in hallucinations in a wake state and in her dreams at night. These hallucinations give the novel a mystical feel, but towards the end, Anya is able to physically touch an object of her hallucination. Once it disappears, she once again questions her sanity and every other event which may or may not have happened in Women's Cell No. 3. It brings to question if the conversations she had with her cell mates were of her own imagination.

[181] Alyokhina, *Riot Days* 30-34.
[182] Ibid., 16.

Each character Anya shared her cell with holds a unique story of their own, and even though they are not real characters, their literary existence brings great commentary to Russian society and how they view women. There are no other commentators other than the women inside the cell, with the few exceptions of the male inmates the women run into at the cafeteria or in the outside area. The isolation of these women makes for interesting conversations, as they live such different lives and provide each other with new perspectives on how they live their lives, even when no one asked. For example, the very neurotic character Ira is described as a toothless and rather 'unattractive' alcoholic. She is also unable to hold a job due to her drinking, yet she has her ways of accessing alcohol. Without any shame or thought whatsoever, she answers her cell mates honestly about how she accesses it. Through sexual services, she would receive a beer or a bottle of vodka. As the women clearly condemns her behaviour, she does not seem to care and goes on to tell them that she received five hundred roubles for having sex with her friend who owns a local kiosk but adds that she had to do 'more' for the money. What that implies upset the women as one goes on to call her a 'slut', which just makes Ira laugh.[183]

On the other side, the other cell mate Maya is described as extremely beautiful, which is met with suspicion of the other inmates in the cell. Her entire being has been fabricated for the desire of men, through plastic surgery, coloured contact lenses and hair extensions. Once she reveals the fact that she had work done, the other cell mates view her with curiosity rather than suspicion. However, once she reveals how she earns her living, she is once again questioned by the other women. Maya lives of 'contributions' of rich men who enjoy her company. These men also purchase expensive gifts for her, but she admits that she is dependent on these 'contributions' to live independently. She is not married and views herself as a free woman, yet she acknowledges the fact that she does have sex with these men, even though she emphasises the fact that it is not expected of her. Maya is happy to tell her cell mates that she receives more or less one million roubles each month, which agitates the other women. Even though the other women's angry comments offended her, she points out how normal it is for a man to provide for a woman and that it is profitable for a man to spend money on a woman. She tries to reason this statement by pointing out how important status is for men, like expensive cars or watches, but nothing will boost their status more than a 'hot' woman by their side.[184]

[183] Kira Yarmysh, *Utrolige Hendelser i Kvinnecelle nr. 3*, trans. Hege Susanne Bergan, (Oslo: Cappelen Damm, 2022), 63-65.
[184] Ibid., 97-104.

These two women live opposite lives, yet their source of income is not that different. Even though their reasons differ, they still provide men with the same labour. Maya is however a more respected member of society due to her looks, while Ira is an alcoholic without teeth who trades sex for alcohol. Yarmysh has a clever way of bringing up themes such as prostitution in this case, through the conversations of fictional women the character Anya shares her cell with. In other ways, she points out certain topics very blunt, as she tells the story of how Anya discovered feminism and describes in detail what it means to a political character such as her.

> In Anja's opinion, violations against women could be put into two categories: The first one was to be condemned, while the second was less serious. Domestic violence and female genital mutilation belonged in the first category, while the second made space for less obvious and debateable matters. Was it acceptable that men gave female colleagues compliments for their appearance? Was it acceptable to use the word 'whore' as an insult? Was it acceptable to use half naked women in car commercials?[185]

She notes that during online discussions about whether it is ok to use the word 'babe' in Moscow, she acknowledges that women are being raped and killed in rural Russia.[186] Yarmysh' categorisation of women's issues into two groups simplifies feminism in a way most people will find digestible. The first category of literal violence is certainly more important than the latter, which discusses language and 'positive' harassment, but it is important to understand that the language used to violate women is further demoting women below men. As the character Maya states, a man's status is boosted by the presence of a 'hot' woman by his side, she is the accessory to promote his masculinity. While women can be a beautiful piece who's only purpose in life is to be desired by men, they are also devalued as someone men can abuse and take advantage of, such as the character Ira. Ira's appearance and behaviour makes her a 'slut', while Maya's appearance gives her the power of choice, yet she is still an object. This contrast is illustrated in the novel, as Ira is almost raped by some of her friends,[187] because of the way men see her, it makes her an easy target of abuse, and the language the women use to describe her further enforces the way society perceives her.

6.4.1 Queerness in Women's Cell No. 3

Yarmysh also brings up the topic of being queer in Russia through the characters Anya, Sonya, and Katya. What she explores is not their identities, but their relations. Throughout the novel,

[185] Yarmysh, *Utrolige Hendelser i Kvinnecelle nr. 3*, 278.
[186] Ibid., 279.
[187] Ibid., 72-73.

Anya reminisces about her past and current relationship with her friend from university, Sonya. The relationship between these two characters is unstable and constantly interrupted by the male character Sasha, another friend from university. There is a recurring drama between these three characters as the two women seem to be romantically involved with each other, but Sonya also seeks a relationship with Sasha. It is a typical love triangle, with reversed genders. Anya also has a sexual relationship with Sasha, but only when she knows the intimacy would hurt Sonya.[188] Their relationships are complicated to say the least, yet it is a representation of queer characters in Russian literature. Even though the love triangle between the university friends is unstable and not necessarily a positive image of queer people, Yarmysh does include the queerness of Katya, one of the cellmates of Anya. She is openly gay and talks with joy about how much she is looking forward to eating a cheeseburger at McDonald's after she gets out and then straight home to Olka. The others react to the fact that she is excited to go home to a woman after being locked up for days and Maya asks her if she is dating a woman. Katya answers with annoyance as she senses the judgement in the cell, yet she goes on to say she is not a lesbian, as she used to date men until she met Olka. Maya is curious and emphasises that she is not a homophobe but does not understand how homosexuality works. Diana is curious about how people react to them on the street, if people yell at them for 'spreading propaganda', and Diana emphasises that the people who yell slurs at them are crazy, yet the curiosity stands. Katya scruffs and replies that if they dare to insult her, they'll be glad that they can walk later.[189]

The conversation about lesbian relationships brings back memories from Anya's first love, Zhenya, which at first brought her nothing but shame. The fact that she was attracted to Zhenya made her feel like a character from a sci-fi movie in which an alien had taken her body as a host. She depicts the love she had for Zhenya as logical and normal when she was with her, but once she was alone, the love seemed unnatural and weird. She was afraid of what people would think of her if they knew that she was in love with a woman, yet the love never turned into a romance and left Anya heartbroken until she left for Moscow,[190] where she met Sonya, who would lead her to another heartbreak.

The queer relationships in Yarmysh' novel are important contributions to Russian literature, despite their flaws, they represent queer love as normal, as all relationships have their flaws.

[188] Yarmysh, *Utrolige Hendelser i Kvinnecelle nr. 3*, 240-241
[189] Ibid., 81.
[190] Ibid., 84-85.

The portrayal of Anya's fear of loving another woman in Putin's Russia is a reality for most queer people who grow up thinking their natural feelings for another person is unnatural.

6.4.2 Yarmysh's authorship

In my process of writing this thesis, Yarmysh published a new book in Russian, which she titled "Харассмент", (Harassment). This fictive novel narrates a female protagonist being harassmed by her boos and discusses power imbalance. The female protagonist narrates a complex relationship with her boss. The idea of this novel was discussed with Alexey Navalny in 2020, but she abandoned the book when Navalny was poisoned and fell into a coma. Though, after Navalny woke up from his coma, she started writing the book, and found more time to dedicate to writing once she was placed under house arrest for violating Russia's restrictions under the COVID-19 pandemic. In an interview with Galina Yusefovich, she discusses the circumstances of her authorship, where she credits the role of Navalny for his help with her writing career, as he was encouraging her to write, and was her first reader of "Harassment" despite both of them being able to meet, as he was in prison, and she was under house arrest. She also credits Navalny to the publication of her first novel, as it was thanks to him that the senior editor of *CORPUS* (the publisher of Kira Yarmysh) agreed to read her novel. On that note, she acknowledges the controversy surrounding the popularity of her authorship, as she is known as the Press Secretary of a very famous oppositional politician. Yet she states that her book would not have sustained three reprints in Russia and been translated into ten languages, if the only reason for her success was her title linked to oppositional politics in Russia.[191]

As Yarmysh left Russia and works from abroad at the time of the interview, Yusefovich asked whether Yarmysh worries about a distance growing between her and her Russian audience. Although this was the case with Russian émigré writers, Yarmysh notes that her case differs, as her readers have access to the internet, and can follow her further published work and personal posts through her social media. She also mentions that her love for Russia is too grand to make her distant and will continue to write about themes in which resonates with Russian readers.[192]

[191] Galina Yusefovich, "Кира Ярмыш написала второй роман — «Харассмент» Галина Юзефович поговорила с ней о роли книг во время войны, эмиграции и литературных советах Навального", *Meduza,* April 18, 2022, https://meduza.io/feature/2022/04/18/kira-yarmysh-napisala-vtoroy-roman-harassment.
[192] Galina Yusefovich, "Кира Ярмыш написала второй роман — «Харассмент» Галина Юзефович поговорила с ней о роли книг во время войны, эмиграции и литературных советах Навального", *Meduza,* April 18, 2022, https://meduza.io/feature/2022/04/18/kira-yarmysh-napisala-vtoroy-roman-harassment.

6.5 The Significance of Russian Voices

For a protest to be effective, the act must move people to take further action. There is more than one way to move people, but in this section of the chapter I will focus on the importance of language. According to EE English Proficiency Index, Russia scores 'moderate proficiency' on the index, meaning that the English skill of the average Russian is not very high.[193] This creates a demand of literature in Russian, which the language does not have a shortage of. However, the lack of knowledge of English can be very limiting and isolating. In her essay *Pussy Riot: a feminist band lost in history and translation,* Marina Yusupova states that Western feminism has been lost on translation, through lack of equivalents of modern terms such as "gender", "masculinity", "queer theory" and "sexism". As mentioned earlier, the stonewall riots and the second wave feminism is not common in rural Russia, or even in bigger cities like Moscow or St. Petersburg, which makes the mention of such great movements less meaningful and inspiring among Russian readers. Therefore, even in Russian translations, feminist literature can feel isolating to a Russian mind, whose relatability is limited through history. This is also why the phenomenon of Pussy Riot is left as a question mark. The name itself is confusing as the literal translation would be too offensive to a Russian audience, "Bunt Pizdy[194]", which translates to "Cunt Riot". Yusupova argues that a Russian name would have a more successful effect on attracting attention towards women's rights in Russia. She states that the English name serves as an empty signifier, as they failed to adopt feminism into a Russian context and rather introduced the idea of it to Russia, but as a foreign concept.[195] It is also worth noting that articles written about Pussy Riot in Russian, transcribes their name into Latin letters, as there is no translation of it on Russian, due to the offensive nature of the Russian translation of the word and does not read well within a Russian audience. Even *Mediazona*, an independent media outlet Pussy Riot was part of founding, latinize the name when they are mentioned in an article.

Both Alyokhina and Tolokonnikova wrote their books in English, perhaps to target a wider audience worldwide. Which they have indeed succeeded to achieve, as they are warmly welcomed in Western countries to perform their art. Although part of their appeal has been that they are a Russian feminist art collective, the fact that they communicate with their fans in English has contributed to their global fame. Though it is questionable why they did not write

[193] EF English Proficiency Index, 2022, https://www.ef.com/assetscdn/WIBIwq6RdJvcD9bc8RMd/cefcom-epi-site/fact-sheets/2022/ef-epi-fact-sheet-russia-english.pdf.
[194] The translation of «pussy», «пизда» is considered a very offensive curse word in Russian.
[195] Yusupova, "Pussy Riot: a feminist band lost in history and Translation", 607.

their books in Russian, to appeal to a larger Russian audience, as their cause in 2012 was to create a space for feminist discourse in their Motherland. Since the publication of their books, they have both left Russia, as have several other members of their band. It is unknown when Tolokonnikova left Russia, but she has been active with Western creatives in artistic projects since 2016.

Alyokhina made headlines in the beginning of May of 2022, as she successfully managed to escape Russia, through a weeklong travel through Belarus and Lithuania. She was serving a sentence at the time, for an Instagram post from 2015 which the government found to be 'propaganda for Nazi symbolism', which in reality was criticizing Aleksandr Lukashenko.[196] The whereabouts of the members of Pussy Riots and Kira Yarmysh are unknown, due to their personal safety, as they are considered not only foreign agents, but also extremists.

The concern for safety has not been in vain, as Pussy Riot posted on their own Instagram-account that Tolokonnikova is now on Russia's most wanted list. Tolokonnikova herself notes that she believes the cause for her addition to the 'most wanted' list could be due to her NFT of the Ukrainian flag being sold for almost 7 million dollars. Her recent art performance *Putin's Ashes* is also a likely cause for the addition.[197] In the official post, they share the news with the incriminating lyrics they sang in Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in 2012. Tolokonnikova signs the text underneath after stating that she is glad to see that they are scared, referring to the Putin administration in the Kremlin. Since the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the group has had a frequent media presence as they have openly been criticizing the war and several members of the group have been touring European cities, where the money fans spend on tickets and merchandise goes to Ukrainian hospitals. Since the invasion, they have started producing more content in Russian, perhaps to reach a broader Russian audience. In a recent music video *Мама, не смотри телевизор!* the group sings in Russian and depicts video clips of the ruins of Ukraine. The lyrics the group sings are phone calls of soldiers in Ukraine to their mothers in Russia and with this video comes their statement against the ongoing war in Ukraine.[198] In the time of writing, the group still performs as a band, yet separately with new members, where some perform with a balaclava anonymously and others perform with their true identities and

[196] Valerie Hopkins and Misha Friedman, "Leader of Pussy Riot Band Escapes Russia, With Help From Friends", *New York Times*, May 10, 2022, (Updated June 22, 2023), https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/10/world/europe/pussy-riot-russia-escape.html
[197] See figure 6.1 in Appendix iii for Instagram post.
[198] Pussy Riot, «Pussy Riot — MAMA, DON'T WATCH TV / MAMA, НЕ СМОТРИ ТЕЛЕВИЗОР (ANTI - WAR SONG)», *YouTube,* December 24, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zr0GN2llJaY.

unveiled faces. They are currently touring in the USA, while Tolokonnikova is occupied by her art performance “Putin’s Ashes”.

Chapter Seven

7.0 Russian Women on Feminism: Presentation of Qualitative Interviews

As mentioned in *Chapter 3,,* this thesis includes in-depth interviews to achieve a broader understanding of how feminism is perceived in Russia after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Although the interviews were initially intended to explore female emigration, the response of the respondents is highly valuable and relevant for the topic of this thesis, which has shown to reflect not only how feminism is received in Russia, but also the consequences of the lack of its acceptance in Russian society. The interviews truly showed the impact of this refusal to integrate of egalitarian values has on the feeling of personal safety of Russian women, especially those who identify as lesbian or queer.

Before I go on, I find it important to once again note that all the interviews were conducted in English, I had no need to translate anything, as all the women I interviewed speak English very well. This factor is necessary to point out, as it is a variable which could turn the questions in another direction as the lack of English skills would make a future in a foreign country extremely difficult, especially coming from a country where the citizens are receiving sanctions on the government’s behalf and through renewed prejudice against Russian civilians across the West. An interview conducted in Russian could also make the conversation flow more naturally, as one is often more comfortable in one’s own mother tongue. This was never an issue, as the respondents seemed comfortable in English and pleased to be able to apply their perspectives on the matter. Moving on, this chapter is categorised in sections of themes relating to feminism, safety, a desire to leave for a new life and the desire to stay in Russia. Listed below is a table of the information about the respondents, how I will refer to them, and when the interviews were conducted:

	Age (18-26, 26-35, 36-45, 46-55, 56-65, 66-75, 76 or more)	Partner/married	Place of residence	Date of interview
A	18-26	Yes, I've been married since this September. I have a wife.	Israel.	October 25, 2022.
B	18-26	Yes, I have a partner.	Norway.	October 27, 2022.
C	18-26	I have a boyfriend.	Russia.	October 27, 2022.
D	36-45	Yes, I have a partner.	Russia.	November 3, 2022.
E	18-26	I have a partner.	Russia.	November 10, 2022.
F	18-26	Legally, I am single, but I have a partner.	Russia.	November 13, 2022.

7.1 On feminism- what is feminism to you?

I left this question intentionally open, to leave an open space for the respondents to respond however detailed, long, or short they pleased. A more closed question such as "do you consider yourself a feminist" would only lead to a conversation I would control the outcome of, which was not my intention. I wanted the respondents to reflect openly about their feelings and association with the word and concept to gain an understanding of how it is linked to their following response regarding their personal safety in Russia and whether it contributes to a desire to leave for another country where egalitarian values are more appreciated and bound by laws to protect women and queer people. This method also aligns with that of Kvale (ref). The responses are listed below in their full context:

> B: Feminism for me is equality between genders, common sense, and respect to each other, to everyone.[199]
>
> E: Well, I think that's just an opportunity to be yourself. So that you don't have to fit those stereotypes that the society tries to put on you. You know, when they say to you like: "Oh, women have to be that and that". Like in Russia, especially in the area where I was born and where I lived for the first seventeen years of my life, it was the concept of being, that typical housewife, was very popular and widespread, so you have to, like, be that type of woman who cleans the floor before her husband comes back home after a hard working day and she just cooks food and typical things like that. So, I think feminism kind of frees you from these responsibilities and gives you an option to choose whether you really want to do that or maybe you want to educate yourself into a career or personal development.[200]
>
> D: Daily life. How can I explain it- if you're a feminist and it's your daily life, then it's not a job, it's not a fight. Like my niece, when she was 13 and she said she was a feminist, and I asked her, when did you become a feminist? And she answered: "When I was born". I think that you can be a feminist on a personal

[199] Respondent B.
[200] Respondent E.

level, not only political or social level, but daily life. When you're chatting, when you're working with your colleagues.[201]

F: Well, feminism to me, I think it's kinda hard to define because I learned about it when I was 14 years old and it was during this Tumblr era [see below for explanation], and I was seeing a lot of posts and I was like "people really think this crap about women and they treat women like shit or something, and I was like, this is so stupid! This is not how it's supposed to be for me, and so for me, I will say feminism is like common sense thing. And I'm terrified when people are saying something about women that are humiliating and I'm like you really think so? So, I every time I hear something like that, I'm shocked. When I hear something like that, I'm so fucking – sorry – in times like these we can hear a lot of things. So, for me it's like ideal common sense that people should have in their minds.[202]

C: Feminism to me... I don't know, the first thing that comes to my mind is love. Because I think feminism is about loving each other. About loving women. And it's about freedom, I guess. Something like that. I don't know... there is a lot of politics in feminism. Lots of I don't know- lot of things that are not so romantic. But I don't know, the first things that comes to my mind are love and freedom.[203]

A: It's like part of my life, I have a very long way through the feminism, because when I was very young, like thirteen years old or something, feminism, it was red flags for me because I wanted to be "not like other girls". (Laughs). My first period. After that, then I grew up a little bit and got into my first relationship and I started the exploring. Exploring like watching some YouTube with a feminist blogger or reading something. And I was very inspired by radical feminism, because I have a lot of problems with my father, but it's not about being man, now I understand that he is like a shitty person, (laughs), no because he is man, but no, it's his personality. But when my partner came out as a trans man, I understand that radical feminism is too much for me, because there are a lot of hate about men, heterosexual relationships, masculinity in general, because now I understand that I'm a lesbian and relationship with trans man, it was not for me, but I really like masculinity in myself, and masculinity in visual, in representation, like masculine women and that stuff. And some sort of taboo is not comfortable for me, so I'm going deeper. And I finish my way at I think, intersectional feminism. Yeah, and I'm not an activist girl, but I always read a lot, and trying to explain guys or maybe other girls who want to talk about it, about women's rights, and what happened in the world. And I think, LGBT lesbian community is very close to feminism nowadays. Because I used to date one girl, she is like butch lesbian from like 19, and she really doesn't… no, not she, because they use he/him pronouns, he really don't understand feminism as a concept. But nowadays, like girls and women my age, they are really deep into conception of feminism more or less, but I think it's common thing in the lesbian community in Russia. Also, there are a lot of radical feminists in Russia but I think it's like a period in history because Russia is a little bit… Just a sec, I can't find the word in English. I'm learning Hebrew and now speaking English… Yes, history of feminism started in… like, we have our own way, not the best way, but we start this process of representation and talking about our problems and rights. Let's say in other words, feminism in USA

[201] Respondent D.
[202] Respondent F.
[203] Respondent C.

> started I guess at 18th century [sic], like marches, protest, and in Russia I guess this process started after the 19th century, because there are a lot of other problems, like the government. Like USSR was very complicated system, and women have equal rights with men, but it wasn't about feminism, it was about government.[204]

As the responds shows, there are different feelings and associations regarding feminism, but the common ground is an understanding of equality. F's reference to the "Tumblr era" represents the feminism shaping Western society today, where political correctness has gained importance in the discourse. The "Tumblr era" is an internet term used to describe a period where social justice was popularised among mainly teenagers and young adults on the website tumblr.com, more specifically between 2010-2015. This specific website allowed anonymity and freedom of expression, which made it possible for young people to explore new identities in the safety of an accepting online community. The online community on Tumblr also created a feminist discourse, which reached corners of the world where the word "feminism" or "feminist" were either unheard of or a word charged with negativity. However, this feminist discourse was not academic and lacked critical thinking and was often published without any feminist theory attached to it. Regardless, this space opened the minds of many young girls and women, as feminism was introduced to them through digestible medias, making it an entertaining learning experience, thus being more approachable for non- academic circles.

As evidenced by respondent F, feminism is understood also as a freedom of expression, and not something that is clearly defined. It is an activity, a mode of communication. The accessibility of feminist discourse online in turn gave women from the lower- and middle-class access to participate in and learn from academic, feminist discourse as well as discourse among themselves in the private sphere. This "Tumblr era" knew no borders, and it also impacted other medias at the time; respondent A mentions *YouTube*, which at the same time popularised video essays of topics such as feminism and social justice, making a younger generation more conscious of the world outside their own countries borders. The accessibility to alternative medias has opened a new world of information the generation before was unable to experience in their formative years. In contrast to when Russian feminist circles were dependent on translating Western feminist literature to Russian, it is now available and easily translated through Google Translate. It is however important to note that some of the women I interviewed are part of the LGBTQ+-community, making them prone to initiate research on their own as the human rights of said community is under serious threat in Russia as I am writing this.

[204] Respondent A.

Women who genuinely enjoy their lives, regardless of how society will objectify them, might feel devalued by feminism as the alternative is equated with a counter-cultural world, thus isolating them from a world where their lives are bearable.[205] This does not apply to women who are already isolated from the normative, such as women who choose to pursue a life outside the home and not centred around men. As E states, feminism frees women from the responsibilities of heteronormative relationships demands of women, especially in post-soviet countries, where women are expected to be a homemaker as well as the breadwinner.

This way of understanding feminism suggests that it is a push back to the context of authoritarian rule. In *Chapter 5,* I discussed the Orthodox Church's impact on traditional values being pushed by the Kremlin, and with a push for traditional values comes a natural focus on motherhood and a woman's place in the home, which Kira Yarmysh's novel *Incredible Events in Women's Cell No. 3* touched upon through one of its characters and the Russian prosecution used as leverage in regard to the criminal cases of Nadya Tolokonnikova and Masha Alyokhina. Motherhood is a necessary tool to suppress women in authoritarian states, whether they are mothers or not, as it creates an expectation of women and their sense of fulfilment, both in the personal and public sphere.

7.2 Personal safety- do you feel safe where you are?

For context, respondent A and respondent B were not inhabitants of Russia at the time the interviews were conducted. Respondent A emigrated to Israel and respondent B emigrated to Norway, while the rest of the respondents were inhabitants of Russia at the time of the interviews.

The intent of questions regarding safety is my own concern for the respondent's well-being, but also an opportunity for the respondents to provide insight to what people outside Russia might take for granted- a carefree life. Respondents interpreted the question of safety differently. Respondent A reported domestic violence and threats as the most pressing question for personal safety:

> A: In my dreams I see what already happened. Because I have a very religious father, who didn't accept me as a lesbian, for a lot of years and he rejected me to visit his house or his other children, because it's like a disease and he doesn't want his other children to become like me. And when I met him before my flight to say goodbye, he said that he want to write a statement to the government that I did propaganda

[205] hooks, *Feminist Theory,* 29.

> of homosexuality and maybe you know in Russia, there is a law, for I guess five years, maybe more, against propaganda of homosexuality through children under 18, but now they are in the process of accepting another law about homosexuality at all. So, to mention it would be illegal, and it's really scary, because Russian government needs evil guy, bad guy, and of course LGBT people are the first ones. So yes, my father wants to send me to jail. Also, he gave me an opportunity, maybe not opportunity, but he offered me to go to monastery, because I'm a lesbian. And when the war started, there was a lot of police officers in the streets, even in, where they were not meant to be. And they started checking out phones in subways, randomly. I always bring my second phone, just in case, to show them, and they checked our personal information, if there are some oppositionist stuff, against the government or Putin. And they get a lot of people like that. And sometimes I dream, and in the dreams, I return to Russia, and I see that, and I knew that one day they come for me, and I don't know if it will be jail or psycho clinic, but it would happen and I don't see any good way for Russia, this situation.[206]

Respondent D made it clear that "safety" was first and foremost a question of where you stayed.

> D: If I would say that I'm safe, that would mean that I am crazy. No one can be safe in Russia. And I think that I shouldn't feel safe because I would lose my ability to react. And here in Russia, it's definitely when you're an activist, but not only, now the level of violence is so dramatical.[207]

Respondents in Russia and in emigration also understood their safety conditions differently. Respondent B interpreted "safety" as being a function of expression and internet safety, and for having been able to take measures to avoid criminal persecution under the foreign agent law.

> B: Now I feel safe, but I was so paranoid months ago when I was this false accusation,[208] I unconsciously hid my phone under my leg when I talked to people… and now I restricted access to microphone in most of the apps, I don't use WhatsApp. Yeah, and Vkontakte, a Russian social network, and I don't want my personal information to get leaked.[209]

Respondent C echoed this clearly, but the respondent also underlined the degree to which being in Russia was connected to a feeling of being exposed and unsafe.

> C: No, I'm afraid that our conversation right now will be used against me, I'm not sure about it at all. I don't really like to... I understand that it's a war, but sometimes I'm afraid to use the word "war", because you can have problems, and the cameras, they really look at you and they can search you, these cameras. And they can hear you, I'm almost certain they can hear our telephone calls.
>
> S: This conversation right now, or the phonelines?
>
> C: The phone... just regular phone calls.

[206] Respondent A.
[207] Respondent D.
[208] Respondent B was accused of being a foreign agent earlier in 2022.
[209] Respondent B.

S: Yes, to assure you, this conversation is encrypted, e2e.

C: I hope so. Well apps like WhatsApp also... encrypted, but I don't feel like it's a safe space. And Telegram is better, we still have some apps to secure it, I'm not sure anything can be hidden from the people who want to get you.

S: I understand. I can also delete the conversation we had through e-mails.

C: I think we didn't say anything much there, so its ok. But no, I don't feel safe here at all, and I'm afraid of the cops. And the police is supposed to make people safe, it's supposed to guard us, but they are against people, against humanity and I don't really like passing them by. So no, I don't feel safe here. At some point, I feel like I'm acting ridiculous, like I don't put on for example, Moscow underground Wi-Fi, sometimes I have this ridiculous thought that they will have the USB sections in trains and undergrounds to charge the phone, and sometimes I'm afraid they want to steal my data, I know it sounds crazy, but at this point of life I can believe anything, I can believe the trains underground steals my data (laughs). So, if I'm talking about this situation, I always call it the situation, I avoid the word "war", I avoid Putin's surname actually, sometimes, it's like Voldemort, and we just call him "he", just by the pronouns. And everybody understands what we're talking about. Or just the crazy one! (Laughs). So, not safe at all. If anything happens to me, I believe, especially in this context, nothing will help me except leaving.[210]

The responses above are in relation to the war in Ukraine and the fear of using the word "war", and their general fear of the government. B lives in Norway, yet she fears accusations of being a foreign agent and for her family in Russia. Actions others take for granted are not a given in the minds of these women, who fear wiretapping and the consequences of saying the wrong things. Others also fear for their lives and that the war would boomerang on Russia and enter the Russian cities they reside in; they also felt deprived of the future they were planning their lives around:

E: No, I don't think so, because, well, one of my friends texted me in a group chat, "girls, have you heard that extremely loud noise?" And I asked her what the noise was, and she said: "well it sounded like a siren, have you heard it?" and we said no, we haven't. And I headed straight to the windows and opened them, and I heard nothing, but later, we realised that it was just something about cars, near her. But several days ago, they started checking the system of, you know, it's a system they use to signal that something is about to happen, so the whole city can hear that, and they started testing it. And some people heard it and they got scared. You get scared when they do anything like that, like, why would they test it? Are we going to be bombed or something? And yeah, but you still think about it. And well, when there were some talks about nuclear bombs. And I started to prepare myself, because at first, I was scared for myself. And I don't want to die, I still don't want to. I realised that if I prepare myself, then it will be easier to leave. And I talked to my psychotherapist about it a lot. Because at first, when it started, I was thinking that my life has been taken away. They have taken away my opportunities and my future, and just my prospects

[210] Respondent C.

> and now also my safety and my security. And worrying what is going to happen tomorrow. So now, like before, like a year or two ago, you knew what would happen tomorrow, so you could make plans, for five years or ten years. Now, my whole attitude to how the world works has changed enormously in a way so that you understand, okey, such things may happen, so you have to plan everything just step by step.[211]

Respondents relate to a timeline in interpreting context. While internet safety and personal safety were present in most of their interpretations, respondent F did, however, see a positive change in 2022, as there were less men on the streets of Moscow:

> F: That's a good question, because even though what's happening, most of the time, I feel like, safe, because something, like, changed, less men are on the street so it's kind of safer. Like my partner, she tells me, she lives in closest like, suburb of Moscow and she is constantly telling me she doesn't feel safe, due to a lot of reasons I guess, but I remember, at my work, the museum, we for a month had this mobilization centre, and they are a lot of military men, and a lot of people who are going to war, and during those months, I was feeling very anxious. In the streets it's kind of safe for me, but again, maybe in the future, because I saw some videos from Kyiv, I sometimes think, hmm, what should I do if like the air danger is going to be announced, and that is terrifying.[212]

For Russian protesters, large cities are often perceived as a place of refuge. Thus, it is hard to interpret the response as directly relevant to ussies of feminism and identity. The feeling of less men in the street could be coincidental to her experience, regardless, the lack of men leading to a safer atmosphere for a woman is noteworthy, as she goes on to say as I asked her if she had more to add other than my prepared questions:

> F: I was thinking in terms of like the question about safety in Russia, in Moscow, I think in a few years it's going to be more dangerous, some men are going to be back, that are going to have this PTSD. And also, like there are going to be more, like homeless people, or asking for money. I know that there are so many ways people can end up with no home or something, but I'm just terrified how it's going to be in the future in Russia.[213]

The "positive change" noted by respondent F was in other words not perceived as something permanent. Indeed, this respondent was also clear in interpreting "rights" in a legal perspective, noting the absence of legislation that effectively protected women:

> F: Still, we have no domestic violence law. I'm not sure, maybe you also made a post about a woman being stabbed by her husband who tried to kill her daughter and her… and this is terrifying. Like men in Russia, are so unsupervised. And have so many issues with their emotions, like they're not like, it's not going to change for years, because this group of men, after their 30s maybe, they are the most terrifying

[211] Respondent E.
[212] Respondent F.
[213] Respondent F.

> group of men, because they are not going to change and they are healthy, or they have power, and they know that there are no laws and also like the society of Russia, it is probably going to protect men, because it's like: "Well, these men deserve this", or "Well, she must be cheating on him" or like "It's not his child or something… so she deserved this". Deserved what? To be stabbed?[214]

The fear of men returning home from a warzone is not limited to Russia, but it has already ended in tragedies as these returned soldiers do not receive proper psychiatric healthcare to treat their inevitable PTSD. For instance, as recently as in October, a former Wagner group- fighter, Denis Stepanov, was accused of murdering a sixty-eight-year-old woman and a thirty-five-year-old woman in a housefire. Before he served as a Wagner fighter, he served a sentence of three and a half years over the charges of beating a man with the metal door of an oven.[215] Stepanov is not alone in this trend, as another returned Wagner fighter, Tsiren-Dorzhy Tsirenzhapov, is also being accused of the murder of a twenty-two-year-old woman. He was initially serving a sentence of thirteen years after being charged with the murder of an eighteen-year-old-woman in 2019.[216] One cannot be sure if these men suffered from PTSD, though it is not outrageous to assume a pattern of violence entering Russia alongside ex-convicts who had their violent crimes pardoned after serving six months in Ukraine. The unpleasant number of 32,000 former inmates fighting in an aggression war, exposing them to violent scenes they participate in themselves, does promise an uncertain future, as they are soon to return to Russia as free citizens, given that former military personnel have already contributed to 27 murders after their return to Russia.[217] The cases F is referring to are older cases of men attempting to murdering their wives and children, more specifically Irina Vedenyapina, who was stabbed in front of her daughter by her husband, who was previously charged with the article of causing serious bodily harm.[218] This case happened in Almaty, Kazakhstan, yet it reached a significant amount of Russian speaking audience, causing Russian women to react to the horrific events.

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[214] Respondent F.
[215] «Ex-Wagner Fighter Charged in Killing of Two Women in Siberia», *The Moscow Times*, October 3, 2023, http://themoscowtimes.com/2023/10/03/ex-wagner-fighter-charged-in-killing-of-two-women-in-siberia-a82645.
[216] Kyrre Lien, "Denis ble benådet av Putin. Så skal han ha drept to kvinner", *VG*, October 15, 2022, http://vg.no/nyheter/utenriks/i/3EbyPq/russiske-soldater-dreper-inne-i-russland.
[217] "Another Former Wagner Mercenary Recruited From Russian Prison Charged With Murder", *Radio Free Europe/ RadioLiberty*, October 10, 2023, http://rferl.org/a/russia-wagner-fighter-charged-murder/32631052.html.
[218] «Пока врачи боролись за мою жизнь, мама взяла кредит и наняла ему адвоката»: Ирина Веденяпина поделилась подробностями зверского нападения мужа», *Elle Kazakhstan*, November 11, 2022, http://elle.com.kz/irina-vedenjapina-podelilas-podrobnostjami-zverskogo-napadenija-muzha/.

7.3 Alternatives: Where is it safe?

As two of the respondents have already emigrated, they are safer in their current places of residence, including A, who finds Israel to be safer than how Russia made her feel, despite Israel being surrounded by war. This is due to Israel acknowledging her marriage to a woman, which Russia does not. It is not just a question of acknowledgement though, it is also a question of feeling safe in her own skin, as she is free to live as a lesbian woman. Which is preferable, regardless of life-threatening situations:

> A: There is a great system of protection from the aggression, so it is very safe, safer than in Russia. And I live in the countryside, near Jerusalem, and on the third month of my residence here, there were a situation with three young terrorists came to us, but two of them just threw other things and ran away, and one of them were shot. He was shot, we have protectors, like security here. Of course, it is a little bit scary, and I want to learn how to shoot just in case. Because terrorist acts, it happens here, and sometimes there are murders. But I think that it happens in all countries, but in Russia no one talks about it. It's like secret materials, and in news, we can't find out. Only what the government want us to know. And now all the independence media, were banned, so you couldn't find out something through there.[219]
>
> S: In Russia or Israel?
>
> A: In Russia, no, no, in Israel there are a lot of media and a lot of opinions and a lot of parties and a lot of protest. They even try parades in cities every year, even in Jerusalem, which is one of the most religious cities in the world. And I think five or six years ago it was a little bit dangerous, not because of shootings or anything like that, but there were protest against homosexual people. But now they, they just weren't any homophobic people when we came out in June. Maybe they just hanging out in, which place, but now it's much easier and safer, and Israel is in process of developing and I guess I have a future in this country compared to Russia.[220]

Other respondents also saw emigration as an option to sustain their way of life, and to increase their sense of personal security.

> F: That's actually a question I was thinking. Because I had thought earlier, we're planning on maybe moving to the USA or staying there for some time. I'm not sure how I feel about their gun laws. I know it's not so strict in Russia and I probably should be, feel less safe, especially nowadays, because you still can just pay your medical papers and buy guns, so in Russia, if you have money, you can do almost whatever you want. And that's the question I'm still thinking about, if there are any other countries I would feel safe, because I remember I went to Rome in 2019, and it was, I saw their policemen and they were staying there with their whole, not small, pistol but shotgun, just regular policemen on a regular street in the afternoon, and I was feeling anxious and "we should just go", because in Russia, in Moscow, policemen, regular ones, they don't have guns, they just have residence sticks, I know it is painful, but

[219] Respondent A.
[220] Respondent A.

more chances to survive. Of course, the case of police brutality, in Russia you can be beaten up till death, but in the USA, you can be shot to death. And I'm struggling with that. Like, I think the safest to go would be Japan, and also, I really like the place, it's so great, maybe I'm also thinking about to go there to study there maybe, but I have to level up my Japanese skills. Yeah, that would be great, even though there are some, sometimes there appears some knife abuse… but overall, I think Japan is safer.[221]

E: I: Yeah, for sure, I would even feel even more safe if we had Finland open still and if my girlfriend had a visa. This already would give me a lot of security, because then I would know if there is like a fatal situation, we can just pack our things and go. Even in Turkey I would feel much safer. Because you realise, like, ok, now you're a little bit far away from all this.[222]

The urgent desire to move to a new country was mostly motivated by the invasion of Ukraine, understandably so, as the panic that comes with a war triggers a fight or flight mode. It is a human need to shelter oneself from danger, however some respondents were already planning to move abroad before the invasion, which in turn disrupted their plan to study abroad and gave Russians a bad name:

C: I'm really afraid that if I go to another country, I will say that I'm Russian, I will get weird looks. And it's very scary to be cut out from the rest of the world, and it's really weird to understand that there is a world and there are good things out there and there are still people going to concerts, and there are still people getting married, because they want to, not just because they want to have the immigration easier. And because they are hopeless, they have nothing to lose. Um, it's really hard to understand that people out there have a normal life, and people have access to music, new music, cause I still have Spotify, and I really don't want to lose it because it's important to me, some parts of me. Just to have some music, just something. And it's so weird that people have McDonald's, people are not getting the notifications about bombs.. like people in Ukraine. And it's just really nice that you are concerned, and you care, because I haven't felt anything like that for a long time, that people cared for us. That people like us, because sometimes it feels like everybody hates us. And it was hard before! I was afraid that I would get to I don't know, New York City, and somebody asks me where I'm from, I would say Russia, I would get a weird look then, now, what would I get? I believe that people care about it not that much, and maybe some of them understand, that it's just all propaganda that everybody hates us. But sometimes it really feels like that because we see the world leaving.[223]

Even though C has a desire to study abroad, as she is learning German, the current situation Russians are in, turned the German lessons unmotivating. The fear of being further isolated once abroad can be discouraging, especially when she considers Russia her home and loves her country:

[221] Respondent F.
[222] Respondent E.
[223] Respondent C.

> C: I don't want to move permanently. I get really sad to think I will never get back here, because, no matter what, I still kind of love my country and I really want it to bloom at some point. To get up and I'm not really sure if it's possible while I'm young, and I guess it just I need to move if I want to have a life, the problem is I don't know where, because I haven't travelled a lot, I know just some countries from other's perspectives, or from films and books (laughs). So right now, I decided that I will get my diploma, because I believe a person with a diploma is a better person than a person with none, so at least I have education, maybe it doesn't count, but still I have it. And I'm working on my photography, so I have something to sell, because you can photoshoot anywhere, so that's what I'm concerned about right now, but I'm planning to move, I just don't know where and when.[224]

The desire to see one's country bloom is common in the responses, yet few are able to participate in the physical change, which leads to a thought pattern of self-doubt. On a final note, D responded to my final question; if she had something to add, which the interview had not yet discussed:

> D: I hope that I will be able to see change in Russia, but I think I will be too old.[225]

8. Conclusion

I opened the thesis with a discussion of the decriminalisation of domestic violence, as it binds the core of the problem questions together; Russia is plagued with an epidemic of violence, which statistics has risen since 2020 and findings suggest will rise more as Russia welcomes back their soldiers who has fought in a war most of the world condemns, but the Motherland has convinced them is a noble service.

The aim of this thesis is to question whether Russia can develop their own version of feminism, through their own framework, how protest biographies contribute to a domestic form of Russian feminism, and in which ways this strand of feminist thinking, and activity is converging on certain 'Russian' particularities and how feminism is framed by these protesters. In addition, I also question whether the war in Ukraine altered conceptions of feminism in any substantial way. I approached these questions through a theoretical framework of a diverse set of thinkers, to assist my arguments; James M. Jasper on protest and social movement theory, Martin Maila on how to read Russian history unbiased by Western theories, which is contradicted by the implementation of Western Feminist Theory. As the findings show, this implementation of

[224] Respondent C.
[225] Respondent D.

Feminist writers, bell hooks, Valerie Sperling, and Rebecca Solnit, were necessary to discuss Western influence; whether it has impacted Russian feminism in a negative or positive way.

Through my analysis of Russian revolutionary women and their contributions to further a feminist cause, the implementation of Western theory assisted the path to understanding how the revolutionary women downplayed their feminist cause- refusing to call it feminism out of fear that it would aggravate their male counterparts- and were used as pawns in a political game of male politicians for their own cause. Whereas contemporary feminism argues that the movement needs the participation from men, Soviet leaders saw early 'feminist' revolutionaries as tools to promote the egalitarianism in socialism by letting women enter the work force. Soviet leaders weaponised the liberation of women to push the narrative that the USSR was a progressive state, where women worked and religious women burned their veils, while the reality turned women into labourers of the state as well as their husbands, as they were still expected to fulfil their 'feminine' duties. I must, however, emphasise that through the contribution of Russian revolutionary women, the double-edged sword of 'liberation', was somewhat relieved through public laundromats, social welfare, canteens, and collective apartments. As Russia transitioned into a market economy, chaos followed, and the Orthodox Church was resurrected into Russian culture. In correlation with the Orthodox Church, the Kremlin introduced the concept of 'traditional values', which agenda has been pushed since Vladimir Putin became president in 2000. Through 'traditional values' the Kremlin also uses feminism as a weapon, by demonising it as an ideology of agents of the West. This weaponizing is necessary for Putin to uphold his political legitimacy, as the existence of a movement which equates masculinity and femininity is a threat to the society which favours masculinity, which Putin represents the hegemony of. Of course, Putin's political legitimacy is not only rooted in his masculinity, but Valerie Sperling's research shows that his legitimacy relies on the acceptance of his subjects and peers; the Russian men.

Although 'traditional values' are allowing legal discrimination of LGBTQ-people and women when their reproductive rights are being debated by the religious leader, Patriarch Kirill, and health minister Mikhail Murashko, due to a declining demography in Russia due to soldiers not returning from the war, I argue that the war is contributing to alterations of how feminism is perceived in Russia. While the Orthodox Church is alarming the Russian population with a declining demography, convicted criminals are returning to Russia, pardoned by the state as they served six months in the Russian army. These criminals, as well as returned soldiers without previous criminal records, are terrorising local women as a result of PTSD. Russian

feminists respond to this by mobilising and protesting the war, such as *Феминисткое антивоенное сопротивление (Feminist Anti-War Resistance) (FAR),* as well as organisations such as *Nasiliu.net,* who combat the epidemic of domestic violence, through assisting victims and working with previously violent men seeking change and asking for help. Thus, they are working towards a potential solution, rather than putting out one fire after another, while the cycle continues.

The war has also affected Pussy Riot members Masha Alyokhina and Nadya Tolokonnikova, and Kira Yarmysh- activists who emigrated from Russia to continue their activist work from abroad. Although I have argued that Pussy Riot fails to consider local history, culture, and socio-politics when they conduct their protest, as they ignore the current environment which is shaping Russia. They ignore this through their protest of the Orthodox Church and its link to the Kremlin, as this relationship was implemented into Russian culture and identity long before their activist career started. Their protest in a sacred space and their vulgar name does not resonate with the average Russian person, who find comfort in the stability Vladimir Putin and the Orthodox Church promises them through their eternal masculinity project. Yes, the protest methods of Pussy Riot are popular and welcomed in Western media, but the Russian population is not ready for the feminism Pussy Riot believes in. However, their involvement in protesting the war in Ukraine is including Russians, as their publications are focusing more and more on Russian language and culture in their art.

I also found feminist aspects through Kira Yarmysh debut novel, *Incredible Events in Women's Cell No. 3,* which is a form of protest in itself, as it includes queer love and has female characters discussing feminist themes such as prostitution, plastic surgery, and questioning the core of this thesis; is it worth spending time on discussing if it is appropriate for men to call women 'babe', when women in rural areas of Russia are being murdered, while she simultaneously notes that the language we allow being used to describe women derogatorily also contributes to the violence.

Finally, the findings of my research data, introduced the input on feminism by six women I interviewed in the end of 2022. The war in Ukraine was weighing heavily on the interviews, as I asked them how their lives had changed due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, in terms of safety and their possible desire to emigrate from Russia as a response to the war. I also asked them how they perceive feminism, to further understand how they experience Russia currently. The responds differed greatly, yet the common ground was an understanding of equality, an opportunity to free yourself from stereotypes and gendered expectations and a part of their daily

life. Some of the respondents' answers explained how they were introduced by feminism, which can in large part be influenced by Western media, namely the social media platform Tumblr and YouTube. Although non-academic, these platforms are independent, which indicates that the influence could be through the Russian side of said platforms. Regardless, they invited young women to explore the concept through their own research, thus allowing them into feminist spaces as they learn what it means to them.

Further, we discussed the question of personal safety, where most responded that Russia does not feel safe, which is why two of the respondents have emigrated to Norway and Israel. Yet respondent F responded that she feels safer in Russia at the time of the interview (November 2022), due to less men in her surroundings. Yet she expressed fear of the day Russian soldiers will return from the war, which I discussed in the chapters before, is already causing terror in Russian cities. Lastly, I asked them where they would feel safe, and although most were reluctant to move permanently, some were willing to leave Russia temporarily, as they would like to return to see their country bloom. However, as respondent D states on a final note, she thinks that she will be too old before she will see change in Russia.

Everything considered, my research has questioned the influence of the West on feminist development in Russia, whether Russia can develop their own version of feminism, through their own framework. In many ways, Russian feminism is already being developed by the organisations who addresses the core of the problem: male violence caused by masculine fragility. The feminists who protested domestic violence on International Women's Day in 2019, and the organisations established to help women leave domestic violence as well as encouraging men to seek help to better themselves, thus bettering the society in which he resides, are implementing feminist values within their own cultural framework. The feminist activism of Pussy Riot and Kira Yarmysh are also contributing to the development of Russian feminism, as they represent Russia in the West, hence, creating a bridge for foreign leverage, which in turn can help Russian women. However much the feminist development in Russia was based on Western influence as well as their Soviet roots, the movement was taken aback due to the push of 'traditional values', but the fight against domestic violence and the cultural frames which causes men turn to violence, is a step towards legal protection of women, which will take feminist questions to the next step, at their own pace.

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Appendix i

Interview guide: Selection 1

• What are your preferred pronouns?

• How old are you? (18-26, 26-35, 36-45, 46-55, 56-65, 66-75, 76 or more)

• Do you have a partner/ are you married?

• In which country are you based?

• Do you have family or close friends located there?

• What do you do for a living?

• Are you a student?

• What do you like to do in your free time?

• What is feminism to you?

• How did you experience the political elections of 2012 and 2018 in Russia?

• The entire world has been affected by Putin's invasion of Ukraine, including the citizens of the Russian Federation. As citizen of the Russian Federation, could you describe how your life has changed since February 2022?

• Could you describe how the plans for your future have been affected?

• How do you understand the memory of the Soviet Union?

• Have you been able to travel outside Russia since February 2022?

• Do you have a wish to study abroad or work abroad in the future?

• Have you considered moving or are you planning to move permanently out of Russia? - What are the reasons that made you consider moving? - What are the reasons that made you rethink moving?

• Do you have family or friends who have moved permanently to other countries?

• What are your thoughts on the work of Russian political activists?

• How has the emigration of Russian political activists affected you?

• Social security and safety are a concern for many; how is your situation right now?

• Do you have a strong support network around you?

• Would you feel safer in another country?

• Is there something else you would like to add, that we haven't talked about?

Interview guide: Selection 2

• What are your preferred pronouns?

• How old are you? (18-26, 26-35, 36-45, 46-55, 56-65, 66-75, 76 or more)

• Do you have a partner/ are you married?

• In which country are you based? • Do you have family or close friends located there?

• What do you do for a living?

• Are you a student?

• What do you like to do in your free time?

• What is feminism to you?

• How did you experience the political elections of 2012 and 2018 in Russia?

• The entire world has been affected by Putin's invasion of Ukraine, including the Russian diaspora. As former citizen of the Russian Federation, could you describe how your life has changed since February 2022?

• Could you describe how the plans for your future were affected?

• How do you understand the memory of the Soviet Union?

• Have you been able to travel to Russia since February 2022?

• Do you have a wish of moving back to Russia in the future?

• As a former citizen of the Russian Federation: - What are the reasons that made you consider moving? - What are the reasons that made you rethink moving?

• Do you have family or friends who have moved to your current location or to other countries?

• What are your thoughts on the work of Russian political activists?

• How has the emigration of Russian political activists affected you?

• Social security and safety are a concern for many; how is your situation right now?

• Do you have a strong support network around you in your current location?

• Is there something else you would like to add, that we haven't talked about?

Appendix ii – A Punk Prayer

A Punk Prayer: Mother of God, Drive Putin Away
Nadya Tolokonnikova's translation, extracted from *Read & Riot: A Pussy Riot Guide to Activism.* [226]

Virgin Mary, Mother of God,

Drive Putin away,

Drive Putin away,

Drive Putin away,

Black cassock, golden epaulettes,

Parishioners all crawling to pay their respects,

The phantom of liberty in heaven,

Gay pride dispatched to Siberia in shackles,

The KGB boss, their principal saint,

Escorts prisoners to jail,

So as not to insult His Holiness,

[226] ***Read & Riot: A Pussy Riot Guide to Activism,* 88.**

Women must have babies and sex,

Shit, shit, shit, holy shit,
Shit, shit, shit, holy shit,

Virgin Mary, Mother of God,
Become a feminist,
Become a feminist,
Become a feminist,

The Church praises rotten leaders,
A sacred procession of black limousines,
A preacher is coming to school today,
Go to class and bring him money!

Patriarch Gunyayev[227] believes in Putin,
The bitch had better believe in God,
The Virgin's Belt is no substitute for rallies,
The Virgin Mary is with us at protests!

[227] Patriarch Kirill's surname.

Appendix iii – Instagram screenshots

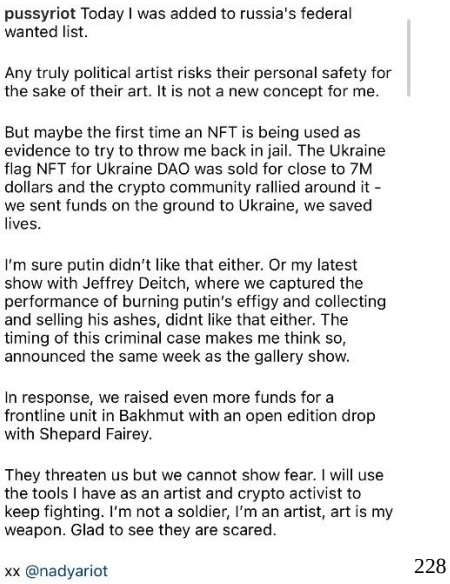

Figure 6.1 Nadya Tolokonnikova's statement regarding her arrest order on Pussy Riot's official Instagram account, Instagram photo @pussyriot, March 30, 2023.

[228] Pussy Riot, (@pussyriot), "Today I was added to Russia's federal wanted list.", Instagram photo, March 30, 2022, https://www.instagram.com/p/CqZjnhGO0ai/?img_index=1.