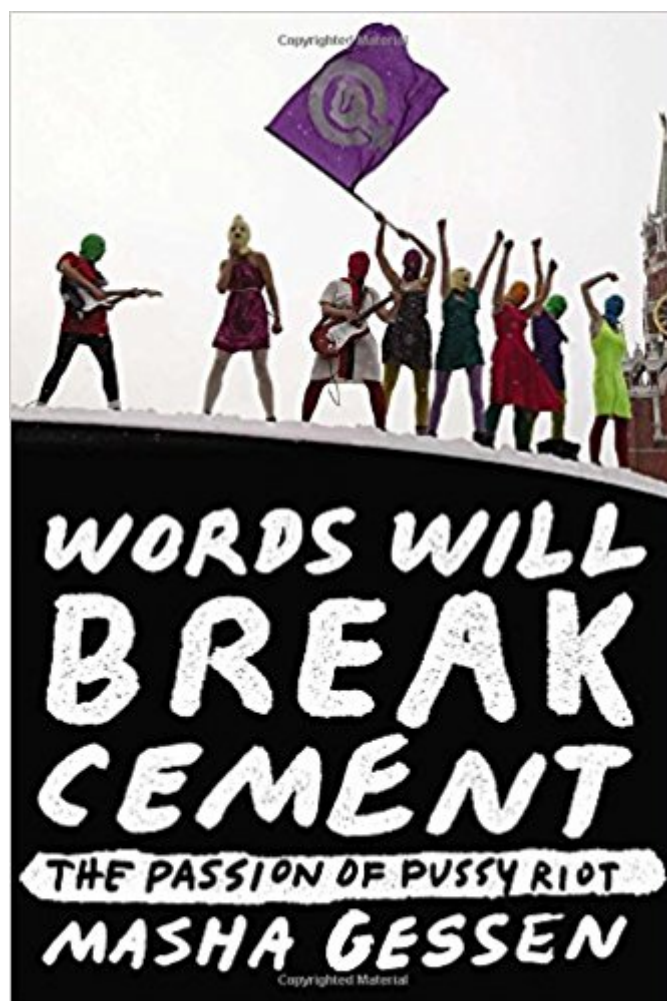


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# Words Will Break Cement: The Passion Of Pussy Riot



## Synopsis

Look out for Masha Gessen's new book, *THE FUTURE IS HISTORY*, coming October 2017. The heroic story of Pussy Riot, who resurrected the power of truth in a society built on lies. On February 21, 2012, five young women entered the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow. In neon-colored dresses, tights, and balaclavas, they performed a "punk prayer" beseeching the "Mother of God" to "get rid of Putin." They were quickly shut down by security, and in the weeks and months that followed, three of the women were arrested and tried, and two were sentenced to a remote prison colony. But the incident captured international headlines, and footage of it went viral. People across the globe recognized not only a fierce act of political confrontation but also an inspired work of art that, in a time and place saturated with lies, found a new way to speak the truth. Masha Gessen's riveting account tells how such a phenomenon came about. Drawing on her exclusive, extensive access to the members of Pussy Riot and their families and associates, she reconstructs the fascinating personal journeys that transformed a group of young women into artists with a shared vision, gave them the courage and imagination to express it unforgettably, and endowed them with the strength to endure the devastating loneliness and isolation that have been the price of their triumph.

## Book Information

Paperback: 308 pages

Publisher: Riverhead Books; First Edition edition (January 8, 2014)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1594632197

ISBN-13: 978-1594632198

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.7 x 8.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 8 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars 44 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #271,084 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #83 in Books > Arts &

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Freedom

## Customer Reviews

**\*Starred Review\*** Moscow-based journalist Gessen, author of *The Man without a Face: The Unlikely*

Rise of Vladimir Putin (2012), is well versed in the tyranny of Putin's Russia, the hardened society from which the Moscow women activists and punk rockers calling themselves Pussy Riot emerged, intent on exposing "the frightful absurdity of the land." They debuted with "Kill the Sexist" and began posting videos of their gutsy guerrilla performances in Metro stations, upscale boutiques, Red Square, and, the site of their swan song, the Cathedral of Christ the Savior. Hampered in her efforts to speak with the three young women who were arrested and found guilty of hooliganism • Nadezhda Tolokonnikova (Nadya), Maria Alyokhina, and Yekaterina Samutsevich (Kat) • Gessen talks with their families and friends, piecing together the stories of their ruptured childhoods, teenage searching, and political awakenings, richly atmospheric accounts that reveal the harsh realities Russians endure. Reporting with spiked irony on their ludicrous trial, Gessen movingly chronicles how courageously Nadya and Maria, mothers of young children, helped others while incarcerated in isolated penal colonies. Pussy Riot is a global cause célèbre, and now Gessen • prickly, frank, precise, and sharply witty • provides the first in-depth look at this story-in-progress as Nadya and Maria, recently released and utterly unbowed, continue to fight for human rights. --Donna Seaman

Praise for WORDS WILL BREAK CEMENT: THE PASSION OF PUSSY RIOT Named a Best Book of 2014 by NPR and The Guardian "Urgent" | damning | Much here will be new to the American reader. All of it is infuriating. • | Alexander Nazaryan, The New York Times "Remarkable" | Masha Gessen [is] one of the most important activists and journalists Russia has known in a generation | disquieting, moving, and closely reported. • "David Remnick, The New Yorker" Simply put, this is the best, most urgent book I've read about art this year. Through rigorous research and furiously fine storytelling, Masha Gessen places the band's founding members unflinchingly into context, revealing the worlds they move between (of Russian activists, intellectuals and prisoners) and reminding us that art really can change the world • if you're an artist with the guts to try." • NPR "The fullest account so far of the Pussy Riot story" | A moving object lesson in the power of art • perhaps especially messy and exuberant art • to rise above repression and have the last, cement-breaking word. • Sara Marcus, Los Angeles Times "Valuable for its insights into the modern cultural history of Russia, with all its idealistic muddles, dead-ends and false starts | ideal for those curious about the country behind the Games." • "The Economist" "What makes someone into a dissident? Why do some people give up everything • home, family, job • to embark on a career

of protest? Gessen set out to answer this question in this excellent short account. The Washington Post "A compulsively readable book that explains in unflinching terms the tragedy that is modern Russia Words Will Break Cement is an instant classic, destined to take its place with Solzhenitsyn's writings about the Gulag... one comes away marveling at the courage of the Pussy Riot members making a stand against tyranny while demonstrating the willingness to pay a steep price" New York Journal of Books "Riveting [Gessen] is a sharp observer of people and events, and she tells Pussy Riot's story in a lively style that is somehow casual, precise, and powerful all at once. She has written a terrific book, a compelling story of three creative women who courageously attacked a repressive regime by disrupting the spectacle of its propaganda. The Rumpus "The significance of Words Will Break Cement...is its demonstration that Pussy Riot's rambunctious confrontations with the authorities are the result of several years of growing frustration with Putin's rule...The genius of Pussy Riot...has been to employ guerilla street theater and a sense of humor along with unbridled profanity all the better to skewer the pretensions of power and privilege Putin insists are his due...Words Will Break Cement makes clear that Pussy Riot is more than just a small group of disorderly anarchists." New York Times Book Review "Masha Gessen's history of founding Pussy Riot members Tolokonnikova, Maria Alyokhina, and Yekaterina Samutsevich provides some crucial context for understanding the motives and means of the group Gessen's account helpfully highlights the lineage of art and protest that gave rise to Pussy Riot.. Pussy Riot is what art endangered looks like; their songs are salvos; their hits are strikes."

Boston Globe "[A] fascinating insider account As Russia waves sabers at the Ukraine and considers a new cultural policy that explicitly rejects multiculturalism and tolerance, the young women of Pussy Riot increasingly seem not like radicals but prophets. Vivid and empathic. Seattle Times "A compelling and eloquent account of current events. The Christian Science Monitor "Gessen offers a lively and sympathetic portrait of the three women at the center of the storm keenly observed and often moving. The Guardian "[An] angry, clear and intimate look at the women behind Pussy Riot. The Sunday Times "Compelling and highly readable. It's an artist biography, a meditation on revolutionary art and gender politics, an absurdist courtroom drama and defiant commentary on the cultural climate of Gessen's homeland • a place for which the author obviously has enduring love and concern. Eugene Weekly "Pussy

Riot is a global cause célèbre, and now Gessen — prickly, frank, precise, and sharply witty — provides the first in-depth look at this story-in-progress. (starred review)"Based on interviews with Pussy Riot members (including those arrested and others in the group), their families, friends, and attorneys, Gessen puts their protest and arrests in the context of post-Soviet, Putin-era Russia's culture and society. Recommended to readers in feminist studies, those following Putin-Russia, and all who study protest art. Praise for THE MAN WITHOUT A FACE: THE UNLIKELY RISE OF VLADIMIR PUTIN "Gessen has shown remarkable courage [An] unflinching indictment of the most powerful man in Russia. [Gessen] shines a piercing light into every dark corner of Putin's story. Fascinating, hard-hitting reading. It is with [the] explosive revelations that Gessen truly excels. An electrifying read from what can only be described as an incredibly brave writer. "Part psychological profile, part conspiracy study. As a Moscow native who has written perceptively for both Russian and Western publications, Gessen knows the cultures and pathologies of Russia [and has] a delicious command of the English language. A fiercely independent journalist. Gessen's armchair psychoanalysis of Putin is speculative. But it is a clever and sometimes convincing speculation, based on a close reading of Putin's own inadvertently revealing accounts of his life, and on interviews with people who knew Putin before he mattered. "Absorbing. "The New York Times Book Review "Powerful and gracefully written. "The New Yorker "The New York Times Book Review "The New Yorker "The San Francisco Chronicle

After reading this book, I am so grateful to live in a country where citizens are free to voice their political views. I think what frightened me the most about this story is that it's true. Three young women living in Russia, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova (Nadya), Maria Alyokhina, and Yekaterina Samutsevich, were found guilty of hooliganism and went to prison (one was finally given a suspended sentence) because they spoke out against Putin and his tyranny. One of the most horrific parts in this book described the conditions of these prisons. The "prisons aren't fit for animals let alone human beings. Atrocious is the word that pops in my head. Along with living in terrible conditions, inmates are subjected to mistreatment by guards for doing something like complaining about the horrible conditions. For example, if an inmate complained about lack of hot water, all the water would be

shut off for all the inmates. These women showed amazing strength throughout their ordeal. This book takes us from the beginning with backgrounds on the women, their foray into political activism, the emergence of Pussy Riot, their fateful performance that got them arrested, the harrowing trial (another example of human rights violations), and finally their imprisonment. A quote from Maria Alyokhina's court statement: "And I am not afraid of you. I am not afraid of lies and fictions and of poorly coded deception in the verdict of this so-called court, because all of you can take away my inner freedom, the only sort that exists in the Russian Federation. But no one can take away my inner freedom." She closes with this: "I believe that openness and public speech and a hunger for the truth make us all a little bit freer." I greatly admire these women for their heroism and strength to fight for better conditions and rights for all. They had the courage to speak out against Putin's atrocities, and they were successful in encouraging others to do the same. If they had failed, they wouldn't have scared Putin into having them arrested. Pussy Riot lives on as an example of feminine power and courage.

"If they wanted to show something radical, feminist, independent, street-based, and Russian, they would have to make it up." Since I first read about Pussy Riot in Western media I've been hooked. Their actions were both understandable but somehow foreign in the eyes of someone who has never been deprived of basic human rights. Once I opened the book I could not put it down. Gessen is the perfect interpreter of Russian culture, in her graceful writing style she combines the story of Pussy Riot with Russian history, literature, culture and language. She explains the context of their actions and puts their staged trial into perspective for the Western reader. The three members of Pussy Riot, Nadya Tolokonnikova, Yekaterina Samutsevich and Maria Alyokhina, which were prosecuted for the minute-long punk prayer are the focus of the book. I felt as I got to know the women behind the masks, but more importantly, I got a better understanding of why they felt obligated to protest in the way they did. We follow the three women from their first performance to a Russian penal colony. Their journey is described by Gessen with the help of the women's speeches in court, interviews with their families, letters they sent from prison and interviews with themselves. If you have ever been curious about the actions of Pussy Riot, showed an interest in Russian history and culture, if you are in favor of human rights and if you call yourself a feminist: this book is for you.

The further you go into the book the more it will shock you. It is a story of a group of idealistic

women punished with an iron fist for a youthful (and admittedly, rather irresponsible and clearly provocative) appearance in a national cathedral. The book, if read to the end, will leave you speechless. The first human instinct here is to try to help, but there are simply no tools. There is an endless sadness to the story of contemporary Russia. Nobody insists that the West is perfect but the Russian reality certainly doesn't belong to the 21st century. It seems like the concepts of fair trial or human rights are not in use there, except for propaganda purposes. The book is not an easy read and it tends to be tedious, but it certainly does have lots of content and it is entirely based on primary sources, it does not quote newspapers, journalists or other books. A very honest approach indeed. I am looking forward to more books by this author.

I loved this book! I gained a great deal of respect for the women of Pussy Riot, their creativity, their humor, and especially their courage. Gessen does a wonderful job of describing their different personalities, including not only their virtues, but also their faults and failings, as well as the various quirks of mind that makes each of them unique individuals. By the end of the book you will love each of them like a friend, and you will be horrified at what they went through trying to make the world a better place. Gessen raises an interesting question in the book. What is it that makes a political action work? What is it that grabs people's attention? Pussy Riot had launched a number of actions, almost all of them, they felt, better executed than the "Punk Rock Prayer" to the Virgin Mary in the cathedral that made them so famous. They went into hiding afterwards, but as they did they wondered if it was even necessary. In all likelihood, they suspected, no one was going to pay them any attention. The action felt like a dud. But sometimes life doesn't turn out the way you expect. Soon Putin himself would be on trial in the world press, trying to explain that he wasn't really the overbearing dictatorial jerk that about everyone concluded he was for what he did to Pussy Riot. If you are interested in political activism, this book will help you figure out what works and what doesn't.

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