

Pussy Riot, the war in Ukraine and Russia's upper middle class

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Over the course of the past week and a half, the Western press has picked up the story, first reported in the *New York Times*, of the allegedly daring escape of Maria Alyokhina, a member of the anti-Putin punk rock group Pussy Riot, from Russia.

The band first came to prominence in February 2012 when they conducted an unauthorized performance in which they yelled slogans hostile to the Kremlin leader and the Russian Orthodox Church in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour. It landed three of them in jail, part of a broader crackdown on anti-government opposition. In August of that year, Alyokhina, the mother of a four-year-old child, received a two-year sentence for "hooliganism motivated by religious hatred." She and others were granted amnesty by the parliament in December 2013 and released.

Pussy Riot's attacks on the Putin government do not go beyond an extremely limited critique of the Kremlin's anti-democratic character and its connections to the nationalist, backward and obscurantist Russian priesthood. The self-described anarchist feminist group has close ties to Russia's right-wing liberal opposition. They have never evinced the slightest sympathy for the socio-economic oppression of the country's working class. They have been feted in the West as "freedom fighters," and with the support of the European Commission, set up the news outlet Mediazona, whose reporting focuses on the repression and brutalities of Russia's justice system.

Alyokhina has been arrested and detained several times over the years for oppositional activities. She was on a form of probation, soon to be transformed into a 21-day sentence in a penal colony, when in April 2022 she disguised herself as a courier, left her Moscow apartment, and somehow managed to evade detection when crossing the Russian and Belarusian borders,

ultimately making her way to Iceland via Lithuania.

The circumstances of Alyokhina's departure are such that one can only assume that Russia's security services, or some segment within it, allowed her to leave, as it is impossible that one of the country's most well-known anti-Putin activists who is under constant surveillance, evaded detection with a food-delivery costume and a Lithuanian visa. It must have been abundantly clear from the outset that she will play a role in the West's anti-Russian campaign.

This is already proving to be the case. In the recent *New York Times* article recounting her departure from Russia, Alyokhina went beyond criticisms of the Putin government or even the demand for its downfall and insisted that the very presence of Russia on the planet is illegitimate and indefensible.

"I don't think Russia has a right to exist anymore," she told the newspaper, arguing that its "values" are so degraded that the country is beyond redemption. "Even before, there were questions about how it is united, by what values it is united, and where it is going. But now I don't think that is a question anymore," she declared.

Hers are not misplaced words. In identifying Russian "values"—which are part of a society's culture—as the source of the problem, Alyokhina, now comfortably ensconced in the "artist community" in Iceland, is endorsing nothing short of the destruction of that society as the solution to its ills. In her depiction of contemporary Russia, there are no class distinctions, there is no exploitation of the working masses by the ruling class, and there are no differences in the "values" of those on the bottom and those on the top. There is also no such thing as American imperialism, much less its "values" of death and destruction. We are meant to think, by implication, that the "values" of Washington and Brussels are the pinnacle of human

freedom.

All of this fits entirely with the war propaganda pouring out of the news channels, halls of power and influential institutions in the US and Europe. Russian culture, Russian people and Russian artists are attacked as the source of the problem as much as the Kremlin, transformed into legitimate targets of retribution. There are, however, some exceptions.

The promotion of Pussy Riot comes alongside growing media attention to the apparent plight of Russia's anti-Putin, middle and upper middle class. Tens of thousands have recently fled their comfortable apartments in Moscow, Saint Petersburg and elsewhere, taking up residence in places such as Georgia, Armenia, Istanbul and Kazakhstan. IT workers, university professors, mid- and high-level managers at private and state-owned enterprises, journalists, attorneys, employees at major cultural institutions and others are jumping ship.

The speed with which many have left Russia is remarkable. By March 13, for instance, the *New York Times* was reporting the case of one 25-year-old man, now in Armenia, who within weeks of the invasion "quit his job as a lawyer with Russia's state-owned Sberbank, organized his financial affairs, made out a will and said goodbye to his mother."

Whatever their opposition to the Russian invasion of Ukraine—which often comes from a pro-US and pro-NATO standpoint—their primary motivation for leaving Russia is the impact of Western sanctions on their living standards and life styles. These layers have benefited from the explosive growth of social inequality during the post-Soviet era, particularly that of the last 20 years under the Putin government. Some may have been longstanding critics of the Kremlin and active constituents of the "liberal" opposition, while others no doubt accommodated themselves to the politics of the government in Moscow so long as it secured for them an acceptable social position. What unites them is their absolute determination not to share the fate of Russia's working class, which is being hammered by job losses and inflation.

Both the *New York Times* and *Foreign Affairs* have featured articles recently about the trials and tribulation of these layers as they open up overseas bank accounts, set up their remote employment from a different location, secure long-term visas and find shops and

restaurants that meet their requirements. They sip wine at outdoor cafés in Istanbul, work studiously at their laptops in new apartments in Yerevan and hold signs aloft at pro-Ukraine demonstrations, images show.

The central concern with these social forces from the standpoint of the West is that they can be galvanized into an active, anti-Putin opposition outside of Russia's borders but with a capacity to also influence the country's internal politics. In the *Foreign Affairs*' "Escape from Moscow" article of May 13, the mouthpiece of the leading US think tank, the Council on Foreign Relations, noted with enthusiasm the historically important and right-wing role that Russia's exiles have played. It appeals for the creation of new institutions of higher education and media outlets that can employ today's refugees from the Kremlin and turn them into ideological weapons.

"With hundreds of thousands of Russians on the European continent, it is time for European governments to start thinking of these exile populations far more strategically. Rather than remaining on the defensive, trying to deflect the disinformation and cyberwarfare campaigns that Moscow aims at the West, they should draw on this crucial resource to wage a new kind of information war on the Kremlin. And although much of the emphasis in the Western media has been rightly focused on Ukrainian refugees, European governments should be wary of falling into the trap of regarding Russian exiles themselves as the enemy, rather than crucial allies, in the effort to counter the Putin regime," counsels the magazine.



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