

Tolokonnikova Protest Takes on Russian Prisons

By [Victor Davidoff](#)

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In 1849, a little known writer named Fyodor Dostoevsky was sentenced to hard labor in Siberia for being a member of an underground club of socialist intellectuals. What he observed and endured in the prison camp radically changed his world view and made him the great writer and a philosopher who was later to write, "The most downtrodden, lowest man is also a human being, and he is my brother."

Until February 2012, Nadya Tolokonnikova was a little known performance artist in the group Voina. Her participation in scandalous art events that included public nudity got her expelled from Moscow State University's philosophy department, where she was a fourth year student. Later, she and several other women went on to found the punk group Pussy Riot, which performed political protest songs in unusual locations, like the roof of a trolleybus, on Red Square and in Christ the Savior Cathedral. The last performance in February 2012 resulted in her arrest under a hooliganism charge.

There was no question that the case was political. Although Pussy Riot only lip-synched in the

cathedral, the words laid over their performance — "Mother of God, cast Putin out" — left no doubt about their message. But when Tolokonnikova, Masha Alyokhina, and Katya Samutsevich were sentenced to prison, the authorities apparently thought they were just getting rid of some scandal-mongering punk rockers and had no idea that these young women were actually strong political opponents.

"This is a trial against the entire state system, which, unfortunately for the system itself, enjoys demonstrating brutality toward its people but remains indifferent to their honor and dignity." Those words sound like they were written by Vaclav Havel or Andrei Sakharov, but they were the closing statement by Tolokonnikova, a 23-year-old mother.

The two-year prison terms of Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina are coming to an end next year, but on September 23 Tolokonnikova announced that she had gone on a hunger strike. A hunger strike is the last weapon of prisoners in the battle for their rights all over the world. But Tolokonnikova's hunger strike is unusual. She is not demanding anything for herself, but is striking to change conditions for the more than a thousand women in Mordovia Camp 14 who will remain after she is released.

Tolokonnikova explained her motivation in a statement. "I understand that in six months I'll leave, but these people will remain here. I won't be able to live with myself if I don't try to change at least something for them."

There is a great deal to change in the penal colony. As Tolokonnikova described in her statement: "My entire brigade works for 16 to 17 hours a day in the sewing shop. At best we get four hours sleep, and we have a day off once every six weeks or so. Discipline is maintained by a system of punishments, like forbidding the prisoners to enter the barracks until lights out, even in autumn or winter. In the disabled brigade, there is a woman who had to sit outside all day and got such bad frostbite that they had to amputate one leg and the fingers on one hand."

The women prisoners are essentially slaves who receive a symbolic payment for their work. Tolokonnikova received a payment of 29 rubles (90 cents) for her work in June. And the work is dangerous in the sewing shop. "Your hands get punctured and cut by the needles, the table is covered with blood, but you still try to sew to meet your quota. If you don't meet your quota, you're beaten. They hit your kidneys or face. The other prisoners do the beating, but only with the knowledge and approval of the camp administration. In one brigade, some novice seamstresses who could not keep up were stripped naked and forced to sew that way."

From this and other descriptions of conditions in today's gulag, it appears that prisoners' rights — or rather, their lack of rights — are at about the level of Stalinist camps. The difference is that in the information age, it is harder for the authorities to hide this. However, despite greater visibility and the efforts of human rights organizations to improve the conditions of camp prisoners over the last 20 years, little has changed. The reason? Perhaps it's the old idea that prison conditions mirror the country's political regime. Tolokonnikova seems to agree with this explanation. "As long as Putin is in office," she wrote, "nothing much will change. He wants the system to punish as much as possible."

Meanwhile, the official reaction to Tolokonnikova's hunger strike was Soviet-style denial. The website of the prison service posted a strange video showing a hallway. Food and water is

delivered to a cell. After a minute, an empty plate is carried out. The video is called "Tolokonnikova's Provocation." A Russian Orthodox priest, Father Alexander Pelin, who visited the camp, commented along the same lines. In an interview to the newspaper Moskovsky Komsomolets, he said, "Most of Tolokonnikova's actions are just PR."

Right now, the Kremlin does not want to listen to Tolokonnikova. But if the world listens, the Russian authorities might have to pay attention.

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