

Pussy Riot cofounder sees protest as a Christian gesture

The Russian punk group headlined Greenbelt, the top U.K. Christian arts and activism festival, this year.

by [Rosie Dawson](#) in the [September 26, 2018](#) issue



Pussy Riot perform their show *Riot Days* at the Greenbelt Festival on August 26, 2018, in England. Photo by Ali Johnston/Greenbelt Festival.

Maria Alyokhina, cofounder of the Russian feminist punk band Pussy Riot, is angry at the suggestion that she is an enemy of religion.

“What we are doing is criticizing the establishment elite of the church,” said Alyokhina, 30, after the group headlined Greenbelt, the U.K.’s foremost Christian arts and activism festival, in late August. Pussy Riot, which began with the 2012 protest that resulted in Alyokhina spending two years in a labor camp, should be understood as a “Christian gesture.”

Pussy Riot is better known in the West for its political resistance—[most recently running onto the field dressed in police uniforms during the World Cup final in July in Moscow.](#)

Such resistance almost prevented Alyokhina from making the band's date at Greenbelt. Russian authorities barred her from boarding a plane earlier in August as she departed for a tour of British arts events, telling her she was forbidden to leave the country until she completed a 100-day community service sentence for taking part in an unauthorized protest in April.

Alyokhina drove to an unsecured section of the border with Belarus and kept going until she reached Lithuania, where she boarded a plane to Britain.

There she joined the current members of Pussy Riot, which describes itself as a collective with no fixed roster. In its current show, "Riot Days," the band re-enacted their story with a live soundtrack of saxophone, guitar, and drums in front of a screen that showed grainy footage covertly filmed during their original protest in 2012.

At the time, Vladimir Putin was on the cusp of being elected for a third term as president with the full support of the Orthodox Church, whose patriarch called him a "miracle of God."

During that 40-second performance, Pussy Riot took to the altar of the Russian Orthodox Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow, shouting "Mother of God—Banish Putin!" from behind balaclava masks.

"We didn't do anything against Christianity," she said. "When you have massive machines of propaganda working against you on TV, calling you the enemies of Christianity, you find it necessary to understand for yourself and to explain to people that this is a Christian gesture that we have done."

The witnesses who spoke at her trial for "hooliganism motivated by religious hatred" were mostly church security officials, she said. She noted the persecution of the church under Stalin, when thousands of priests were murdered or sent to prison camps.

"For this country to have a church which is now serving the KGB is a crime," Alyokhina said. That was the main reason for their protest at the cathedral.

For those 40 seconds, Alyokhina was sent to a labor camp 3,500 miles from her home and her young son. Her two fellow protesters, who were not at Greenbelt, also served long sentences.

The Greenbelt performance also included documentary footage from the courthouse where Alyokhina was tried and film of the journey to the camp in the Ural Mountains. Snow is featured prominently. The act ended with a challenge to the audience: "Freedom doesn't exist unless you fight for it every day."

When asked whether she was part of a larger Christian resistance in Russia, Alyokhina replied, "I hope so."

"Some of the people who supported us in 2012 were priests who left the church," she said. "In the penal colony it was important to me to receive letters from people in the church to say they were supporting us."

As Alyokhina prepared to return to Moscow, it was not clear what the consequences would be for breaking the travel ban.

"I'm not afraid because—not just with Putin but with any system which oppresses—the base of oppression is fear," she said. "It is they who are afraid."
—Religion News Service

A version of this article, which was edited September 7, appears in the print edition under the title "Punk band Pussy Riot takes music and message to Christian arts festival."