THE VOINA GROUP: RADICAL ACTIONIST PROTEST IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIA

Staging various performances, Voina acted against the police, FSB, prosecution service, courts, government, and bureaucratic privileges, thereby harvesting all the sympathy that any self-proclaimed Robin Hood, from Alexey Dymovskiy to Alexey Navalny, could expect to receive in contemporary Russia.

Coming into existence in February of 2007, only two years later and with four young and publicly unknown members, the VOINA GROUP became nationally recognised newsmakers with their activities reported by all major Russian media outlets, from the popular Komsomolskaya Pravda to Kavkaz Center, a site run by Chechen separatists, without even mentioning sites dedicated to contemporary art. Simply put, Voina was the first successful activist project in Russia. Following the high-profile case against two of the group’s members, Oleg Vorotnikov and Leonid Nikolaev, who were arrested on the 15th of November 2010, and after the group was awarded the state-backed innovation Prize on the 7th of April.
2011, both events raising the public profile of the group and sparking nationwide debate, Voina became a household name.

"Voina was born out of a meeting between Petr Verzilov, Oleg Vorotnikov, Natalya Sokol and myself," said Nadezhda Tolokonnikova—later to become world-famous as the leader of the PUSTY RIOT group and sentenced by Moscow’s Khamovnichesky District Court to two years in a penal colony in September of 2012.—speaking in an interview with The New Times magazine.

When we got together we were able to keep up a certain degree of audacity and boldness, maintaining this spirit among ourselves and feeding it into our joint actions, thus making it possible for Voina to emerge as a contemporary political and art-phenomenon. We had a common background, sharing our sympathetic views on rebel culture and reluctant to seek our niche among existing systems in art and politics. Voina was envisaged as a movement and, potentially, as a whole genre in art and politics. The style adopted by Voina has become a genre available to those feeling the need to protest. That’s the group’s ever growing objective: to set a course of action." Asked about the group’s choice of name, Oleg Vorotnikov said: “We picked the angriest, the most aggressive name for ourselves to make sure we would go all the way.”

Cats and Teddies
Of particular importance to the group’s emergence was Anton Nikolaev, the stepson of the well-known performance artist

2 Valeriya Pakhovaya’s interview with Oleg Vorotnikov featured in The Third Channel, 13th of May 2011.
Like others organized during the group’s first year, this performance remained unknown to most of the public. It was not until another action, this time staged in Moscow’s Timiriazev State Museum of Biology, a place that does not generally enjoy a large number of visitors, that the news of Voina spread all over the Internet in Russia. During the event, which took place on the 28th of February 2008, and was documented in detail, five heterosexual couples had sex under a banner with the title of the protest. **FUCK FOR THE TEDDY BEAR HEIR!** (TIMELINE P. 31) The coverage of the event posted by Alexey Plutser-Saro, a Russian philologist, on his blog has been viewed thousands of times.

Plutser pointed out that the event in the Museum of Biology had modest aims and “highlighted a number of ethical and moral problems existing in our society. "High" art doesn’t really attract viewers, [...] these days you can’t hope to attract viewers with something lofty. What they want is either porn or scary chainsaw massacres.”15 However, the performance title was topical and lent it a socio-political meaning. In his letter to the Federal Assembly, dated the 10th of May 2006, President Vladimir Putin urged Russians to increase the birth rate as a matter of vital national importance. The private question of how many children to have became state policy. The “teddy bear” motif came from the official symbol of the United Russia party, as well as from Dmitry Medvedev’s surname.16 The group’s members “announced” their performance at a United Russia’s Young Guard meeting on the 23rd of February 2008, infiltrating the crowd and holding up a banner reading “FUCK for the Teddy Bear Heir!”—a strong argument in favour of a political reading of an event that was perceived by many as “pornographic.”

**Reportages from Voina’s Performances**

Plutser has been the key figure representing Voina in the media since 2008. Even though he did not take part in most of the performances, his blog became the group’s main information platform. Voina emerged at a time when public politics in Russia existed only on the Internet, and Plutser realized that the 2000s generation might be interested in a simulacrum no less than in a description of real-life processes, the latter simply being absent from Russia’s socio-political sphere. As noted by Jean Baudrillard, “substituting the signs of the real for the real” is the emerging motto for contemporary culture, which in its evolution moves from the “reflection of reality” paradigm to attempts to camouflage its absence before going further and reaching its current state when signifiers are no longer related to any reality whatsoever.17 Plutser described Voina’s performances in a way that made them look attractive in the Internet space, which has its own communicative rules, regardless of how close his “reportage” was to the actual course of events. Keenly aware of his ability to captivate his potential audience, Plutser adjusted the content and style of his stories about the group’s performances to satisfy societal demands.

Supported by several other activists, Oleg Vorontnikov carried out the performance **A COP IN A PRIEST’S ROD** (TIMELINE P. 33) on the 3rd of July 2008. Dressed in a priest’s robe and wearing a police uniform underneath, he went into a supermarket and filled his shopping basket with various items (including vodka, whisky and an erotic magazine). As he took the items out of the shop without paying, the staff and security officers did nothing to stop him. The protest, which clearly demonstrated that the country’s strongmen and clerics are subject to a law unto themselves, was characterised by Plutser as anti-globalist, aimed against “Russia being absorbed by Western financial monsters,” and “caused by the indignation at the way the Russian people are being robbed by fat cats.”18 Russia’s

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11 The family name of Medvedev is derived from the Russian word for “bear” (medvěd). The “teddy bear” motif came from the official symbol of the United Russia party, in conjunction with Dmitry Medvedev’s surname.
12 At the end of 2008, a conflict separated the “Moscow faction” of Vasiliev and Tolokonnikova from the “Petersburg faction” of Vorontnikov, (Natasha) Sokol and Plutser.
problems, including the poverty of its population, were blamed not on the regime, based on the union between the Church and security forces, but on the aforementioned "financial monsters" and vague group of "fat cats."

\textbf{IN MEMORY OF THE DEMCBRISTS (TIMELINE R 27)}

\textit{Image/Photo}, a performance which took place in one of Moscow's Auchan hypermarkets on City Day in 2008 (an official holiday celebrated with festivities all over the capital on the 7th of September), consisted in an imitation execution, in which five people were hanged. The famous Decemberists hanged on the Tsar's orders after the 1825 rebellion were replaced, as Plutsor mentioned in his reportage, by "three migrant workers and two homosexuals, one of whom [Oleg Tasiyev] was also a Jew." The migrant workers were paid for this acting job, while the two Muscovites who impersonated the "homosexuals" belonged to the group and took part in the protest on ideological grounds. As usual, Plutsor's story was full of fiction; it mentioned "victims under the influence of drug intoxication." It also stated that "Oleg Vorotnikov, who possesses certain hypnotic powers, turns the unfortunates into zombies prior to the massacre." There were also descriptions of "clearly insane, helpless people, pumped up with drugs, being dragged onto stepladders." When confused readers asked if it was a mock hanging they were answered with the following: "Who knows. Looks like it was for real, although I'm not sure." In fact, as Oleg Tasiyev wrote on the blog of Oleg Tasiyev, they used "a climbing harness—everything was really held by it, the noise was just a decoration."

The killing of innocent migrant workers was a theme that could not help but provoke societal response. A year before Voina's protest, the Russian Internet was shocked by a video entitled

\textbf{Execution of a Tajik and a Dagestani,} published online on the 12th of August 2007. It shows two young men, one of North Caucasian, the other of Central Asian appearance, their hands tied behind their backs, against the background of a red flag with a swastika. The former has his head cut off with a knife, the latter is shot. The video of this double murder was presented on behalf of the so-called National Socialist Party of Russia. Almost a year later—three months before Voina's protest—on the 5th of June 2008, Russia's Investigative Committee (at the time still reporting to the Prosecutor General's Office) said the video was genuine, and a murder case was launched. As of the writing of this text, Russian law enforcement bodies have still not managed to identify the perpetrators of these hideous crimes.

As describing the performance organised by Voina, Plutsor made it sound as if it were naturally associated with the murder of the two innocent workers, a Tajik and a Dagestani: "The victims were forced to kneel down, their sentences read out loud, including quite transparent slogans: [...] "Down With Queer Yids," "Down With Slit-Eyed Chinks," "Chinks Co to Chinkistan," "Spades Co Home," "Siberia for Siberians," "Long Live Moscow" and so on."

In all probability, most of the readers of Plutsor's blog do not in the least associate themselves with this kind of xenophobic neo-Nazi ideology. However, there were people who took his rhetoric seriously—for instance, some photos of the performance, captioned "A Tajik and a Gay Executed in Auchan," were published on the web forum of the Movement Against Illegal Immigration (MAI), accompanied by comments claiming that "Auchan is notorious as a Chink shop." The Volgograd section of MAI covered two of Voina's performances on its website under the headline "Some Anarchists Are Against Immigrants, Too."

Plutsor's simulacrum game (in his replies to comments: "High-Profile Story About Videotaped Murder of Two Gets New Twist," in Echo Moskvy [Echo of Moscow], 5th of June 2008, http://www.echo.msk.ru/news/518042-echo.html; date of access September 2012; on the 18th of April 2011, the Moscow City Court upheld the decision of the capital's public prosecutor to declare MAI extremist and ban its activities.

ments, he scornfully distanced himself from "repressive chauvinist xenophobes and homophobes who possess no artistic taste or abilities of reflection" clearly proved too complicated for some of his nationalist audience, those who saw the protest as carried out by like-minded friends.

Vorotnikov's statement, cited by Plutser, was clearly marked by anti-liberal rhetoric: the migrants play the roles of slaves, or serfs, while the gypsies symbolize the Decembrists' liberal spirit, their vague desire, perhaps senseless in the context of Russia, to replace monarchy with constitutionalism. In some shape or another, monarchy is Russia's fate. Of course, apart from that, we wanted to defend traditional Russian moral and ethical values [sic], which are quickly being destroyed today. TV is simply overflowing with morally degraded persons, rootless cosmopolitans [sic] and panics [sic]. We have been accused of having an amoral stance, whereas in fact we represent and symbolically execute this very amoral society, the one that secretly approves of slave labour and pedantry. And we are happy to see the resurrection of the Russian Empire going at full speed. We greet the brother nations of Ossetia and Abkhazia! These nations need a firm hand [sic]. Liberalism, if we understand it in the same way as in the 90s, brought nothing good to Russia. Whether this tirade was made in sincerity or we are looking at yet another example of role-playing, it is impossible to say.

Hopeless Revenge

The popularity Voina craved could only be achieved at the price of ideological amorphousness, a state allowing everyone to draw whatever image best reflected his or her hopes. In many ways,

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viation Prize, run by the National Centre for Contemporary Arts, awarded Voina with a nomination for the **BEST WORK OF VISUAL ART** (TIMELINE p. 95). 24

Early in the history of the movement the founders of Voina defined their political creed, stating that the path leading towards a goal is no less important than the goal itself. In the words of Vorotnikov, "In our view, one of the forms of castrated extremism, still quite vivid as an image, is the anti-globalist movement, whose activists behave like hooligans, breaking shop windows. This is seen as an ideological struggle in the West, so no one calls them hooligans. In Russia such wholesome wild behaviour is not popular with the young." 25 In an interview published on the 20th of March 2008, Voina activists (as far as is known, it was Verzilov who answered the questions, after which the transcript was edited by Vorotnikov with the help of other members of the group) said:

Art being taken from galleries and brought outside into the streets is the healthiest sign of the times. Voina is at the origin of a completely new type of activism. Here emphasis is shifted from the abstract and symbolic mini-gesture made within the limits of gallery art, and onto specific, naked street action, made as close to the viewer as possible. 26 That was the direction in which Voina developed, speaking not to the art community or even to the existing political opposition, but to their fellow citizens in general:

We have to show people what forms of possible self-organisation are available to them. [...] To inspire individuals to create their own band, to be autonomous and bold. Today this kind of art is mainly promoted and propagandised via the internet, since there are no other resources from federal control. 27

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Voina’s performances have undoubtedly struck a chord with thousands of people, they have been supported by human rights activists and radical culture practitioners. After the performance that saw Leonid Nikolaev, a blue bucket on his head, jump onto a Federal Protective Service car equipped with a special light signal, parked on the Kremlin Embankment, Lev Ponomarev, a member of a movement called For Human Rights, said: "He expressed the sentiment of hundreds of thousands, perhaps even millions, of those who are appalled by the behaviour of those people driving their cars with flashing lights around Moscow, safe in the knowledge they are not going to be punished, as well as by the authorities’ inadequate response to this." 28 "In this particular instance it’s totally unimportant whether it’s good or bad. It’s NECESSARY, that’s for sure," as noted by Lev Rubinstein, one of the founders of Moscow Conceptualism, 29 while talking about A Cop in a Priest’s Robe. Andrei Yerofeev, a well-known curator (ESSAY P. 190), compared Voina’s activities to the most famous protests of Russian civil society in 2010. According to him: "Voina’s performances give the passive, mellowed Russian bourgeoisie the joy of seeing acts of retribution, vivid, charged, and overheated with emotions, precisely the acts that the society itself would love to commit in response to the authorities’ injustices." 30 The data made public by the Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences in June of 2011 suggests that 34% of Russians (60% in Moscow) feel a constant urge "to shoot down all bribers and pimps." Another 38% of the survey participants admit to dreaming, at least from time to time, about a similar revenge exacted on bureaucrats and corrupted strongmen. According to the sociologists in question, this study has provided only two conclusions: first, the delegitimisation of the authorities is ongoing; and secondly, levels of aggression are significantly increasing. 31

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25 We Are An Art Band," Interview published on the blog of Alexey Plutser-Sarna. 23rd of March 2008; date of access September 2012.


27 Ibid.


29 See footnote 11, p. 254.


31 Full report: "20 Years of Reforms Through the Eyes of the Russians," Moscow: The Institute of Sociology, Russian Academy of Sciences, 2011, pp. 60, 74; see also "Every Third Russian Wants to Shoot Down All Bribers," Lenta [Tape], 23rd of June 2011.
Comparing Yerofeyev's words to the aforementioned sociological data, one can conclude that Voina's performances, which actually demonstrated this delegitimisation of the authorities, provided perfect responses to the society's demands, albeit occasionally in an aggressive form (as was the case with Coup d'Etat, during which police cars were being turned over). The same point was made by Ekaterina Degot in April of 2011: 'Hatred towards United Russia and, more generally, to the powers that be has now reached its highest apex, and this can only be compared to the hatred felt towards communists, for instance, in 1988. This hatred is boiling, it is corroding people from the inside and (in contrast to 1988) can find no constitutional means of escape. The only problem is that while blindly hating Putin and the FSB, people increasingly hate “the blacks,” “the lefties,” “the Yanks,” “the Muscovites,” “the clever ones,” and so on. As a symptom, hatred is easily shifted. This hatred is Voina. A powerful symptom that cannot be ignored.32

However, when two of the best-known activists of the "St Petersburg faction," Voroninov, the leader of Voina, and Leonid Nikolaev, who joined the group less than a year earlier, were arrested on the 15th of November 2010 and ended up behind bars, not many were willing to act for the sake of their freedom. On the 18th of December, only approximately two hundred sympathisers attended a solidarity rally at Moscow's Pushkin Square. And one cannot help but notice that all those people represent two very narrow segments of the society: they are either radical left-wing political activists or non-conformist artists. The only one to post bail money for the imprisoned activists was the British graffiti artist Banksy.33 With some bitterness, one can only say that the situation was affected by the current mentality of the "advanced" part of Russian society:

The fantastic success of Voina's performances resulted from the fact that the art group managed to say what hundreds of thousands wanted to say, but didn't know how. It would not be an overstatement to claim that, at a time when the political arena was cleared—by hook or crook—of any kind of protest groups, Voina emerged as the most widely heard voice of the independent civil society. Staging various performances Voina acted against the police, the FSB, prosecution service, courts, government, and the bureaucratic privileges, thereby harvesting all the sympathy that any self-proclaimed Robin Hood, from Alexey Dymovskiy to Alexey Navalny,34 could enjoy a free ride is all very nice and well, but when your "enjoyment" is under threat you just drop it and find yourself a new toy—that's easier than doing something. The hope that the hipster generation might be able to launch a revolution has failed.

The ideologues of Voina used to say that instead of using the language of human rights activists, the ideologues of older decades—which were, apparently, "hopelessly outdated" and "completely incomprehensible" to contemporary youngsters (and not only)—they were trying to shape a new, fresh language, capable of attracting many supporters from social strata that are totally disinterested with traditional social liberalism. This proved to be an illusion: after having a good laugh at the sixty-metre picture of a male member opposite the FSB headquarters in the northern capital, the "drop it" generation carried on with its business, ignoring the arrest of those who had drawn the prick they admired so much. "According to Voina, their goal is to make sure that people are not afraid of cops in our country. Are they succeeding? Of course not. Humiliated, frightened, robbed of their rights, citizens look at Voina's phallus online as if it was an icon of a protector saint. They haven't grown less afraid or more knowledgeable, as Ekaterina Degot correctly noted with sadness."35

35 Alexey Dymovskiy (b. 1971); former police major who became widely known after the posted two videos on YouTube, in which he made allegations of corruption and illegal activities among his chiefs and fellow officers (2009). Within days, the videos were seen by 700,000 people, provoking a public outcry and prompting several similar YouTube postings. Dymovskiy was fired and founded a rights defense group; Alexey Navalny, see footnote 8, p. 150.
expect to receive in contemporary Russia. Hatred towards the government, its power structures and judicial system, universally perceived as corrupt and definitely hostile towards the population, allowed the group to attract the sympathies of a significant number of Russians, while the absence of any meaningful doctrine allowed it to avoid schisms.

The first post-Soviet generation, now all grown up, could, as Anton Nikolaev shrewdly remarked, hold the slogan “We Don't Know What We Want” above their heads—all of them, almost without exception. The cynical “office plankton,” dreaming of spitting into the faces of the state, police, priests, oligarchs, whatever the result, got the heroes whose lack they had felt so acutely, people devoid of pathos and unruly, in the shape of Voina. There was a demand for these kinds of heroes in society, and the art group Voina filled in this gap.

December 2011/October 2012
Vera Akhcheva (b. 1988) is a feminist activist and a member of the Moscow Feminist Group. She graduated from the Russian State University for the Humanities and is currently working on her PhD thesis dedicated to the contemporary women's movement in Russia. She co-organized several feminist street protests and public events in Moscow. As a columnist she regularly contributes to the internet magazines such as openSpace.ru, w-e-a.ru (Weekend Open Spaces), chastnosti and information portal rasspros.ru with articles addressed primarily to women and the feminist community. She lives and works in Moscow.

Pussy Riot's performance became the subject of intense discussions about morals and religion within the Russian Orthodox Church itself for the first time. Their actions also introduced the previously non-existent, word into the vocabulary of the media: "feminism."

Hiding their faces behind multi-colored balaclavas, the female art collective Pussy Riot (image p. 290) staged performances, "illegal gigs" as they call them, in Moscow in the middle of 2011 and beginning of 2012. The last and most well-known of these was a punk prayer, 'which was staged in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour on the 21st of February 2012. The performances resulted in the arrest of three members of the group who were accused of "hooliganism" and sentenced to two years in prison. The sentence of Yekaterina Samutsevich (image p. 290) was overturned by the Moscow City Court on the 1st of January 2014.

The term is borrowed from the artist’s own usage, see: livejournal.com/72243.html; date of access February 1, 2014.