

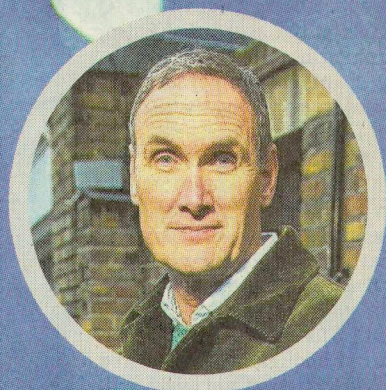
# NEWS REVIEW

12.01.14

THE SUNDAY TIMES  
thesundaytimes.co.uk/newsreview

Section 4

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## PUTIN'S HELL COULDN'T BREAK US

Maria Alyokhina, left, and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova say Russia is built on the model of a prison colony

After 22 months of abuse and forced labour in jail, members of Pussy Riot are unbowed. In their first interview with a British paper since being freed the protesters tell Mark Franchetti other inmates suffered even worse

It was not until a chilly autumn day in 2012 when Nadezhda Tolokonnikova arrived at Penal Colony 14 in Mordovia, a region 300 miles southeast of Moscow known for its infamous Soviet-era gulags, that the irreverent Kremlin critic first began to understand the ordeal she faced.

One of three members of the punk group Pussy Riot jailed in the face of international outrage for singing a song against Vladimir Putin in Moscow's main cathedral, Tolokonnikova was hauled in front of the two bosses who run the notorious women's prison camp. "You should know that when it comes to politics I am a Stalinist," one of the two men, a colonel, said proudly.

The other warned her that unless she confessed her guilt she would never be granted parole. Tolokonnikova, a pretty 24-year-old brunette known for her chutzpah, refused. "You should know," the prison officer stated, "that we have broken stronger wills than yours."

Tolokonnikova, who had already spent several months in a Moscow pre-trial detention cell, had been dispatched to Camp 14 to serve her two-year sentence after her conviction on charges of hooliganism motivated by religious hatred.

"I'd heard terrible things about Mordovia," Tolokonnikova said last week. "In prison they say you haven't really done time unless it's in Mordovia. Nonetheless, when I was first transferred from Moscow to Prison Colony 14 I thought to myself that I could handle it, it could not be that bad. But that's where I came face to face with hell."

Tolokonnikova spent a year at the prison camp. Four months ago, after going on hunger strike for nine days and penning an open letter in protest at the conditions there, she was transferred to a penal colony in Siberia that she says was more law-abiding. In December, as part of a wider prison amnesty and to improve Russia's image before its Sochi Winter Olympics, Putin released early both Tolokonnikova and Maria Alyokhina, 25, another Pussy Riot member. (Yekaterina Samutsevich, the

third Pussy Riot member, had been freed in 2012.)

Over coffee and cigarettes during a late-night meeting in a Moscow cafe last week, Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina gave their first interview with a British newspaper since their release. People at other tables gawked at arguably Russia's two most controversial young women.

Tolokonnikova, who wore a blue dress and Dr Martens boots, is well known as the face of Pussy Riot because of her good looks. Six years ago, while eight months pregnant and before Pussy Riot was formed, she took part in a public orgy "art performance" with her husband.

Visibly more defiant and bullish than before they were jailed, she and Alyokhina denounced the prisons in which they had been held for nearly two years as a "hellish world of slave labour and abuse" — a "disgrace" that they are now vowing to expose and reform.

Tolokonnikova revealed that she had asked her father to bring an icon of the Virgin Mary for her cell. "It was important to me because my father and I have always maintained a strong tradition in our family," she said.

"Whenever we went to church together, we bought an icon that we particularly liked. Over time we accumulated quite a collection of icons at home. That's where my intellectual roots lie, if you will."

Tolokonnikova's critics will be surprised to learn that she found solace in a religious icon, given the widespread anger and deep offence that Pussy Riot caused among Russian churchgoers.

They were jailed after their performance in February 2012 of a "punk prayer" inside Christ the Saviour Cathedral in Moscow, where Putin attends Christmas and Easter services. The stunt was designed to criticise the Orthodox Church's close links to the Kremlin. Four band members, wearing their trademark brightly coloured balaclavas, danced and sang at the altar as outraged church staff and security sought to stop them.

"The KGB chief," they sang in a reference to Putin's career in the Soviet secret police, "is their chief saint, he leads protesters to

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