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To cite this article: Nadezda Petrusenko (13 Nov 2023): Historical consciousness and the consolidation of the opposition: uses of the history of revolution and dissent in Russian protest art, 2008–2012, Post-Soviet Affairs, DOI: 10.1080/1060586X.2023.2270374

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2023.2270374

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Published online: 13 Nov 2023.

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Historical consciousness and the consolidation of the opposition: uses of the history of revolution and dissent in Russian protest art, 2008–2012

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**ABSTRACT**

The protests against election fraud in Russia in winter 2011–2012 were the first in the post-Soviet period that were attended by a united opposition, and attracted hundreds of thousands of previously apolitical citizens. This article seeks to explain mass participation in the protests by focusing on uses of the history of revolution and dissent in Russian protest art. The article investigates whether a common historical consciousness, which could have made it possible to unify previously fragmented opposition and mobilize previously apolitical citizens, was manifested in protest artworks created by artists with differing political ideologies. The conclusion is that the official historical narrative promoted by the state – of a spiritual unity between a strong state and the people – was challenged and undermined by protest artists, who have characterized Russian history as a continuous struggle between an oppressive state and civil society. This finding indicates that a common historical consciousness was manifested in protest artworks.

**Introduction**

The winter of 2011–2012 witnessed a new phenomenon in Russian politics, wherein thousands of people protested against election fraud on the streets of Moscow, St. Petersburg, and the major cities of Siberia and the Urals. Protests in the early 2000s were organized and attended only by representatives of the fragmented Russian political opposition, but the winter protests were different in two ways. First, they were the first time opposition groups with differing political ideologies acted as a united front. Second, these protests were attended by regular, previously apolitical, Russian citizens (Etkind 2017, 1; Greene 2023, 449). Scholars have identified a common disappointment in the political regime, which was characterized by corruption and bribery, along with the state’s inability to address these issues as the main reasons why the previously fragmented opposition was able to unite and mobilize common Russian citizens at that time (de Vogel 2013; Greene 2023, 447; Robertson 2013, 13; Shevtsova 2012, 21–22). As Denis Volkov (2012, 175) argues, the opposition and protesters were united by their highly critical attitude towards those in power. Olga Malinova (2018, 98) states that, in addition to political problems, the protests were caused by the people’s general disagreement with the hegemony of the government’s discourse. Previous researchers, however, have not paid much attention to this aspect, which will be the focus of this article.

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An important part of the government’s discourse was the official historical narrative of a “thousand-year-old” Russian state, which is eternally and deeply entrenched in the spirit of the Russian people (Khodnev 2021, 252). This narrative was developed during the 2000s to create a new Russian national identity and cultivate a common historical consciousness of the people, based on the ideals of a strong state and loyalty to it (Kangaspuro 2022, 21; Koposov 2011, 137, 164; Sherlock 2007, 161, 179).

Previous research on the 2011–2012 protests and the political opposition during Dmitry Medvedev’s presidency (2008–2012) has shown that the protesters and opposition used the history of revolution and dissent to articulate their agenda and mobilize support. The legacy of Soviet-period dissidents, for example, was important for the protesters’ and opposition’s efforts to articulate their agenda and ethical values (Horvath 2015; Kozlov 2020, 212, 221; Parisi 2017, 45). Similarly, the revolutionary history of Russia was used by opposition organizations, who built their identities on the Bolshevik and Communist legacies (Erlikh 2008, 120; Malinova 2015, 53; Miller 2018, 177–178). Protesters even used contemporary revolutionary history, namely that of the Arab Spring, a series of uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa that started at the end of 2010, in their discussions of possible political change in Russia (Volkov 2012, 167–168). Could these uses of history have been expressions of a shared historical consciousness that united the fragmented opposition and mobilized support among the previously apolitical citizens? Answer to this question will be sought after by examining the case of Russian protest art.

Protest art, i.e. self-initiated art that is critical of the ruling regime, was one of the arenas in which individuals with varying opposition ideologies used the history of revolution and dissent. Although the works of protest art that used this history were not the majority of the protest artworks at that time, they emerged throughout the period studied in this article (see Dziewanska, Degot, and Budraitskis 2013; Jonson 2015, 151–153; Weibel 2015, 287), which indicates the existence of a trend. These uses of history, however, have not been examined closely by scholars, even though protest art has been a vital channel for expressing political opinion in Russia since the early 2010s (Lerner 2021, 1763; Volkova 2015, 515–516) and, according to some studies, helped to fuel dissatisfaction with the regime long before the protests started (Dziewanska, Degot, and Budraitskis 2013, 8; Jonson 2015, 246–258; Volkova 2015, 518–522).

**Historical consciousness and uses of history**

The central concept of the article, “historical consciousness,” deals with historical thinking that connects an interpretation of the past to an understanding of the present and expectations regarding the future (Jeismann 1979, 42). Building on this definition, Klas-Göran Karlsson (2010, 54, 57; Karlsson 2014, 57, 58, 65, 70) characterizes the concept as analytically and empirically elusive, arguing that historical consciousness can be studied only when it is made manifest through the use of history.

The use of history takes place in the arena of historical culture, wherein society decides which history is important and communicates that history in diverse ways (Karlsson 2010, 76; 2014, 65). We may speak of a use of history when people, individually or collectively, activate parts of their historical culture to meet specific needs and achieve specific goals. This is most frequently done by connecting contemporary issues to historical events (Karlsson 2010, 88; 2014, 70–71). Karlsson (2014, 72) has developed a typology of uses of history, which includes a particular type of history use called “a non-use of history.” Non-uses of history occur when a particular history could have been used but was deliberately not, generally to ignore elements of history that do not ideologically fit with the preferred narrative and threaten to undermine its meaning (Karlsson 2014, 75).

By analyzing uses and non-uses of the history of revolution and dissent in protest art, it is possible to observe whether specific artworks created by artists with differing political ideologies manifest a similar historical consciousness. According to Karlsson, historical consciousness is characterized by particular historical thought patterns that hold different social groups together (Karlsson 2014, 57).
These are the results of individuals’ mental operations, which create historical meaning (Karlsson 2010, 55) and can be studied only when they take the form of historical narratives – the most concrete expression of historical consciousness (Karlsson 2010, 79). Therefore, the analysis in this article will focus on the historical narratives constructed by protest artists.

Karlsson (2010, 81) argues that it is necessary to analyze historical narratives in the context of the historical culture of a society. This means that, on the one hand, every historical narrative is part of the historical culture from which it originated, and so historical narratives constructed by protest artists are part of the historical culture of post-Soviet Russia. On the other hand, every narrative also has a historical perspective in the sense that it depends on previous historical narratives, and is often constructed in direct relation to these narratives. For this study this implies that the historical narratives of protest artists could have been influenced by the Soviet narratives of revolutionary history. In the next section narratives of revolutionary history and dissent are contextualized in relation to official Russian historical culture.

The history of revolution and dissent in official Russian historical culture

Narratives of revolutionary history originate from the historical culture of the Russian revolutionary underground prior to 1917. These narratives glorified the revolutionary struggle and presented revolutionaries of various political affiliations as martyrs and heroes who were ready to sacrifice themselves for the cause (Mogilner 1999; Petrusenko 2017, 110, 112–119).

Some of these narratives became part of the official historical narrative of the Soviet state, which was developed to legitimize that state and create an imagined community of Soviet people (Goodwin 2010, 229–246; Koposov 2011, 85–86). In the official historical narrative, the October Revolution of 1917 is viewed as a central historical event that led to the creation of the Soviet state (Kolonitskii 2009, 37–38; Sherlock 2007, 8). This explains why revolutionary history was considered to be of great importance during the Soviet period.

The official Soviet narrative of revolutionary history was based on Vladimir Lenin’s article “In Memory of Herzen,” published in 1912. In this article, Lenin divides the Russian revolutionary movement’s history into stages dominated by “three generations of revolutionaries” (Kozlov 2020, 218; Rozhansky 2013; Trigos 2009, 56). The first revolutionary generation was the Decembrists, i.e. the military officers and noblemen who conspired to abolish serfdom and autocracy in Russia at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Their conspiracy culminated in an unsuccessful uprising on 14 December 1825. The second generation was the revolutionary organization the People’s Will, which was active in the second half of the nineteenth century and famous for conducting a series of terrorist attacks against government officials, including the successful assassination of Emperor Alexander II in 1881. The third generation was Lenin’s own Bolshevik Party. The “three generations of revolutionaries” were cast as heroes and martyrs for the cause, and have been promoted in propaganda since the 1920s (Erlikh 2008, 13; Goodwin 2010, 229–230; Koposov 2011, 86–87, 89, 124; Kozlov 2020, 218; Trigos 2009, 83).

The non-Bolshevik revolutionary parties and organizations that existed at the same time as the Bolsheviks (and were glorified in the revolutionary underground) were excluded from the official Soviet historical narrative (Trigos 2009, 69) on the basis that they were seen as rivals and enemies of the Bolsheviks.

After the downfall of Communism in the 1990s, the new Russian state sought to dispose of the official Soviet historical narrative in an attempt to distance itself from the Soviet past (Kolonitskii 2009, 43; Linchenko and Anikin 2020, 359; Sherlock 2007, 177). Attitudes towards the country’s revolutionary history changed drastically, in the sense that the revolutionary struggle was no longer glorified, and revolutionaries were no longer seen as heroes (Bagger 2007, 113, 115).

Despite their opposition to the Soviet regime, Soviet-period dissidents (groups of intellectuals who challenged the Soviet regime from the mid-1960s onwards) have never occupied the same place in the historical narrative of post-Soviet Russia that the “three generations of revolutionaries”
had in the official Soviet narrative, largely due to their limited influence on the new political regime after the downfall of Communism. Official attitudes towards dissidents have been marked with contempt since the former dissident Sergei Kovalev, an ombudsman and presidential human-rights commissioner under Boris Yeltsin, openly condemned the war in Chechnya (Horvath 2015, 581). Unsurprisingly, knowledge of Russian dissident history remains meager in post-Soviet Russia (Kozlov 2020, 216).

From the beginning of Vladimir Putin’s first presidency in 2000, a new official historical narrative of a “thousand-year-old” Russian state that organically connected Russia’s imperial, communist, and post-communist periods was promoted (Malinova 2015, 71; 2018, 94–95; Sherlock 2007, 161). This narrative highlighted the significance of the unity of the state and the Russian people, while simultaneously ignoring the state’s violence against the people (Demydova 2013, 63–64; Koposov 2011, 164).

The official historical narrative of the 2000s is essentially counter-revolutionary. Revolutions are often associated with instability, which is in opposition to the idea of a strong and reliable state. The development of the official historical narrative in 2004 and 2005 has been interpreted as “a preventive counterrevolution of the regime after the Ukrainian Orange Revolution” (Kangaspuro 2022, 21). In this context, the October Revolution was downplayed as a peripheral event (Koposov 2011, 147), thereby indicating how the history of Russian revolutions has been marginalized.

**Selection of artworks and materials**

The artworks examined in this article were created to be displayed in the public realm rather than in galleries, and, thus, can be defined as works of public art (Blanché 2015, 34). While public art can be produced in various forms, in this study I focus only on works of performance art and street art. *Performance art* refers to unsanctioned street performances for an unprepared, “accidental” public (Ponosov 2016), and *street art* refers to “self-authorized pictures, characters, and forms created in or applied to surfaces in the urban space that intentionally seek communication with a larger circle of people” (Blanché 2015, 32).

For this study I selected the most famous works of protest art that used the history of revolution and dissent, and that were created between 2008 and 2012. I tried to include in my study artworks produced by artists with differing political ideologies in opposition to the ruling regime. The following protest artworks are included in the study: the performances entitled “In Memory of the Decembrists” and “Storming the White House,” produced in 2008 by the anarchist performance group Voina;\(^3\) “Lenin Was an Extremist,” which was spray-painted in two different versions in 2011 and 2012 by a group of artists called Zoa-Art from St. Petersburg (at the time, this group of artists was connected to the political party The Other Russia, formerly the National Bolshevik Party – NBP);\(^4\) the performances “Free the Cobblestones,” “Kropotkin-Vodka,” “Death to Prison, Freedom to Protest,” and “Putin Pissed Himself,” which were produced by the anarchist-feminist punk art collective Pussy Riot\(^5\) in 2011 and 2012; the stencil graffiti “Narodovolki” (“The Women of the People’s Will”), spray-painted by the feminist street artist Mikaela in 2012.\(^6\)

Two types of material connected to the above-mentioned artworks were used in the study: (1) visual materials depicting the works of art, and (2) texts (created by the above-mentioned artists) in which the historical narratives present in the artworks are discussed. In the following paragraphs, I explain the selection of materials.

The protest artworks included in this article were performed or spray-painted in the streets of Moscow and St. Petersburg. However, the originals of these artworks were not available for viewing when I conducted my research because illegal public art is a short-lived artform. Clearly, a street performance exists for only that moment in which it is performed, and street art is often removed within a few days of being spray-painted. To preserve their artworks, artists usually take pictures or make films in order to distribute these images through social networks (Zimberg 2012, 100, 101).\(^7\) All of the images of protest artworks discussed in this article were obtained by searching the internet.
This implies that some works of public art that could have been relevant to this study have been omitted due to their lack of online presence, and including such artworks could have altered the results. However, by focusing only on the protest art that was popularized by its creators on the internet, I analyzed the artworks that are more easily accessible to many, and thus more crucial to the development of the common historical consciousness of the opposition and protesters than works of art that are less widely known.

The selection of visual materials was determined in terms of their direct connection to the artists. The street performances by Voina and Pussy Riot were filmed by members of each group and subsequently published on YouTube. These videos are available on different YouTube channels, but only the videos posted by the groups’ official social-media accounts were selected for study. The photographs, taken by Zoa-Art and Mikaela and published on their LiveJournal blogs, of their street artworks are the ones that were used in this study. Since the originals of the artworks were not used in the analysis, some aspects of the artworks that may have been relevant have perhaps been omitted.

The selected protest artworks were promoted by the artists on social media and in interviews with different media. Only texts that include reasoning regarding the historical narratives connected to the artworks were selected for analysis, as these texts aid in understanding the artists’ uses of history. Although several different social-media channels were used by the artists to promote their work, I have restricted my study to texts published on LiveJournal since all of the artists used LiveJournal accounts to publish detailed reports about their art. The YouTube videos made by Voina and Pussy Riot that depict the actions selected for this article also contain written introductions, which I refer to since they include explanations of the artists’ uses of history. Interviews with Mikaela and Pussy Riot conducted by various media were also used as source materials for the same reason.

Texts about Zoa-Art’s art available on the internet includes little information that relates to the historical narrative used by the collective in “Lenin was an Extremist.” Consequently, I conducted a semi-structured interview with Zoa, the collective’s primary artist, to obtain an understanding of her use of historical narratives. The interview took place in 2021, 10 years after the artwork was created, and after Zoa had left The Other Russia (Zoa 2021). Accordingly, the artist’s reasonings as voiced in the interview may differ from her opinions and intentions when the artwork was created. In order to avoid any misunderstanding, Zoa was asked to reflect on any differences in her perception of the history used in her artwork over time.

**Uses and non-uses of history**

In this section, I identify uses and non-uses of the history of revolution and dissent in the selected protest artworks. During the course of the analysis, I introduce the artworks in some detail. At the end of the section, I present conclusions regarding the histories that were used by the different artists and the similarities and differences between each, as well as the functions of uses and non-uses of these histories.

Before 2011, the history of the “three generations of revolutionaries” promoted in the Soviet state seems to have been considered to be a useable past in the context of protest art. It seems that, in addition to the post-Soviet communists (see Erikh 2008, 120; Malinova 2015, 53), protest artists considered that history to be useable due to its familiarity to most of the population.

The history of the Decembrists was used in Voina’s performance “In Memory of the Decembrists,” which was filmed on 7 September 2008. While holding a rainbow flag banner announcing “Pestel Did Not Fucking Fall,” the participants performed a mock hanging of five people: two homosexuals, and three Central Asian guest workers (Figure 1). The “executed” homosexuals and guest workers played the roles of the Decembrists in the performance, according to Voina’s social-media accounts. Given the discrimination against homosexuals and guest workers in Russian society, it is possible to conclude that the history of the Decembrists was used in the performance to draw attention to this social problem.
In their next action, “Storming the White House,” which was performed on 7 November 2008, the anniversary of the October Revolution, Voina used the history of the Revolution. Alexey Plutser-Sarno, the ideologist of Voina, ironically introduced this performance in his LiveJournal on 9 November 2008 as a celebration of the “Great October Revolution named after V.I. Lenin.” During the action, several members of Voina climbed over the fence and entered the grounds of the White House of Russia, the government’s headquarters. These actions clearly imitated the storming of the Winter Palace in Petrograd, the Russian government’s headquarters at the time, by Red Guards in October 1917. At the same time other members of the group shone laser beams depicting skull and crossbones onto the façade of the White House (Figure 2). Plutser-Sarno stated that the skull and crossbones were a warning to “the government about the Russian people dying
while the new bourgeoisie is drowning in luxury.” The history of the October Revolution of 1917 was thus used by Voina to illuminate social inequality in post-Soviet Russia.

Since 2011, the history of the “three generations of the revolutionaries” has been used only by Zoa-Art, which was connected to The Other Russia, the party that built its ideology partially on the Bolshevik legacy. Zoa-Art’s stencil graffiti “Lenin Was an Extremist” was spray-painted for the first time in 2011. It depicts a person with the face of Lenin who is dressed in contemporary clothes and being dragged somewhere by two uniformed policemen, and so is reminiscent of opposition political activists being arrested during street demonstrations in Russia (Figure 3). Zoa-Art thus used the history of Lenin, who stood in opposition to the Imperial government, to highlight treatment of contemporary political activists.

After the winter protests of 2011–2012, Zoa-Art created a new version of the “Lenin Was an Extremist” graffiti, which appeared in the music video “Bronenosets” [the Battleship] by the popular Belarusian-Russian rock group Lyapis Trubetskoy. The graffiti, similar to the image produced in 2011, was accompanied by the phrase “Don’t you care?” (Figure 4). These words, used as a refrain in the “Bronenosets” song, were included in the graffiti to establish a clear connection between Zoa-Art’s work and the song. Alongside the image of the arrested “Lenin,” these words can be seen as being related to the attitudes of the Russian population to the treatment of contemporary political activists.

Protest artists who did not see themselves as ancestors of the Bolshevik legacy, however, deliberately did not use the revolutionary history popularized by the Soviet state in their artworks, even in cases where this would be appropriate. The reason for this non-use of revolutionary history is likely its connection to the Soviet state, as is suggested by Rozhansky (2014) in relation to the 2011–
2012 winter protests. Such artists clearly did not want their artworks to be seen as being inspired by the official Soviet narrative. Particularly interesting in this context are the non-uses of the history of the “three generations of the revolutionaries” (the October Revolution and the Decembrists), which was previously used by Voina, by Pussy Riot, a group that included former members of Voina.

On 7 November 2011, Pussy Riot released their first music video, “Free the Cobblestones.” On their LiveJournal the group stated that the video was released on “the day of Revolution.” The history of the October Revolution, however, was not used by Pussy Riot, since this history is not mentioned or referenced in the song’s lyrics, music video, or the group’s commentaries on the song.

Pussy Riot’s third song, “Death to Prison, Freedom to Protest,” was performed and filmed on 14 December 2011—the anniversary of the Decembrists’ uprising that took place on Senate Square in St. Petersburg. Members of the group must have been aware of the significance of the date since it had been used for political actions by the post-Soviet opposition on previous occasions. Note that during December of 2011, some journalists compared the ongoing events and the Decembrists’ uprising (see Rozhansky 2014). Moreover, the song’s lyrics include the following line: “Occupy a square, make a peaceful takeover.” Although Pussy Riot could have made a connection between that line and the above-mentioned events in Senate Square, they chose not to: neither the song nor the group’s LiveJournal post about it mention the Decembrists.

The history of the “three generations of revolutionaries” was deliberately not used by Mikaela in her artwork “Narodovolki,” a graffiti series that was, according to the artist’s LiveJournal, spray-painted on the streets of Moscow in September 2012 (Figure 5). The artwork depicts six female revolutionaries: Vera Zasulich (1849–1919), Sofia Perovskaya (1853–1881), Vera Figner (1852–1942), and Yekaterina Breshkovskaya (1844–1934), who

![Figure 4. Zoa-art’s new version of the “Lenin was an Extremist” graffiti (2012; used with permission).](image-url)
were associated with the revolutionary organization the People’s Will, and Maria Spiridonova (1884–1941) and Irina Kakhovskaya (1887–1960), of the Party of Socialist Revolutionaries (PSR) and Party of Left Socialist Revolutionaries (the Left SR Party). “Narodovolki” was created using stencil portraits that were based on the most famous images of these women, which were accompanied by short texts that stated the women’s names and the prison sentences they served as a result of their activism. Interestingly, despite her intention to portray revolutionary women, Mikaela did not depict any of the Bolshevik heroines that had previously been praised in the Soviet Union. This suggests that the artist wished to refrain from using that particular history in her artwork.

The history that was used by Mikaela, i.e. the history of non-Bolshevik revolutionary women, was of mixed character. The history of the People’s Will, the second generation of Russian revolutionaries, according to Lenin, was promoted in the Soviet Union, though without a particular emphasis on women. The history of the PSR and Left SR was forgotten in the Soviet state due to these parties’ opposition to the Bolsheviks. Mikaela thus chose to use the part of Russian revolutionary history that was not popularized within the official Soviet historical narrative. According to Mikaela’s LiveJournal, the graffiti series was spray-painted for the first time soon after the members of Pussy Riot received their harsh sentences for “hooliganism.” The history of non-Bolshevik revolutionary women was thus used by Mikaela to make a statement about the treatment of female political activists in Russia.

Russian revolutionary history that was not promoted in the Soviet state was also touched on in Pussy Riot’s second song, “Kropotkin-Vodka,” released on 1 December 2011. On their LiveJournal, the group explained that the song was dedicated to a fictional revolutionary drink, Kropotkin-Vodka, that has different effects on those who drink it: it helps protesters to feel good, but is a deadly poison to the authorities. The drink was named after Peter Kropotkin (1842–1921), a Russian anarchist philosopher and revolutionary.¹³ Pussy Riot’s reference to Kropotkin is not surprising because, as has been observed by Luke March (2015), the majority of contemporary Russian anarchists adhere to Kropotkin’s views and political heritage. However, the group did not use the history of Kropotkin because no historical narrative connected to his name is present in the song or music video, or in the commentaries about the song that the group has produced.

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Figure 5. The artist Mikaela and her artwork “Narodovolki,” a graffiti series spray-painted on the streets of Moscow in September 2012. Source: photo by Victoria Lomasko.
Uses and deliberate non-uses of the Russian revolutionary history that was not popularized in the Soviet Union were quite rare in protest art made between 2008 and 2012. The reason for this is likely the unfamiliarity of that history for the majority of the Russian population, which means that it could hardly be considered to be “useable” past.

The history that was most often used by Pussy Riot at that time in both their artworks and LiveJournal posts was that of the Arab Spring. This is not surprising since, according to some scholars, it inspired activists worldwide, including in Russia (Dannreuther 2015, 80; Rendle and Lively 2017, 243). “Free the Cobblestones” references the Arab Spring by calling on the listener to “create Tahrir on Red Square.” Tahrir Square in Cairo was occupied by protesters during the Arab Spring, and became one of the primary symbols of the Egyptian revolution of 2011. In their LiveJournal post about “Kropotkin-Vodka,” Pussy Riot expressed hope that the video would inspire people to “make Tahrir on Red Square.” The history of the Arab Spring was thus used by Pussy Riot in both cases to call for protests in Russia.

The narrative of the occupation of Tahrir Square by Egyptian protesters, however, was not mentioned in Pussy Riot’s third song, although the group called on the listener to “occupy a square” in the lyrics. The reason for this non-use of the history of the Arab Spring is likely connected to the negative responses of consumers to Pussy Riot’s art (mentioned by the group on their LiveJournal) with regard to their earlier uses of that history.

Although Pussy Riot mentioned the Arab Spring in the LiveJournal post relating to their fourth song, “Putin Pissed Himself,” which was performed on 25 January 2012, in Red Square, the song uses the history of the Soviet dissidents to explore the cruel treatment of political prisoners arrested during the protests. The song included the following line: “For your and our freedom.” One of the group’s LiveJournal posts stated that this line was in homage to the Soviet dissidents who went to Red Square with banners that proclaimed “For your and our freedom” in August 1968 to protest the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. The history of Soviet dissidents was thus used by Pussy Riot to talk about the cruel treatment of political prisoners in Russia.

My analysis of the selected artworks has shown that the artists used different narratives of the history of revolution and dissent. I claim that the artists used these diverse historical narratives for the same two purposes: (1) to highlight the oppression of different groups (homosexuals, guest workers, political activists, and women) in post-Soviet Russian society, and (2) to call for protest against that oppression and other ongoing injustices. In the following two sections, I analyse the historical narratives that were created for these two purposes to establish whether the above-mentioned uses of history are expressions of a common historical consciousness that could have united the Russian political opposition.

**Using history to talk about oppression**

In their action “In Memory of the Decembrists,” Voina used revolutionary history to address the situation of homosexuals and guest workers in post-Soviet Russian society. The historical narrative chosen by Voina, the execution of the Decembrist leaders, was an essential part of the Soviet narrative of the Decembrists as revolutionaries who, despite their knowledge that they would fail, willingly sacrificed themselves for freedom (Rozhansky 2013; Trigos 2009, 186). However, the guest workers and homosexuals that stood in for the executed Decembrists were not represented by Voina as individuals willing to die for their ideals. On the contrary, in the YouTube video they look not like heroes, but victims obediently surrendering to their “executioners.” The only people who spoke about ideals and values in connection to the action were the “executioners,” played by members of Voina. Plutser-Sarno refers to Oleg Voronnikov, a founding member of Voina, who spoke about monarchy (the destiny of Russia), traditional values (that should be protected), and the revival of the Russian empire (as exemplified by the war with Georgia in August 2008) while discussing the meaning of the action. The ideals that were articulated in this case are clearly connected to the Russian state of the nineteenth century, when the Decembrists were active, and to the Russian state
of 2008. By explicitly mentioning these ideals, Vorotnikov shows that homosexuals and guest workers, in analogy with the Decembrists, “died” due to the ideals of the Russian state. Through this, Voina changed the Soviet narrative of the Decembrists’ heroic revolutionary self-sacrifice into a narrative of forced martyrdom caused by an oppressive state. The role of the Russian government in this martyrdom is emphasized by Voina’s statement that the “execution” was a gift to the then-Mayor of Moscow, Yuri Luzhkov (1936–2019), on Moscow City Day. Luzhkov, a member of the pro-Putin political party United Russia, was infamous for his xenophobic utterances and banning of the Pride Parade in Moscow. The Russian state was thus represented as being responsible for the oppression of the revolutionaries of the past and marginalized groups of the present.

In the action “Storming the White House,” Voina used the history of the October Revolution to highlight social inequality in Russian society. On his LiveJournal, Plutser-Saro explained that the skull and crossbones image projected onto the façade of the White House was a warning to “the government about the Russian people dying while the bourgeoisie is drowning in luxury.” These words imply that the Russian government supported the interests of a wealthy minority over those of the rest of the population. It was a reminder of the Soviet narrative of the October Revolution, which was considered to be a liberation of the working class from the oppression of the bourgeoisie that took power in Russia during the February Revolution of 1917 (Zadorin 2007, 4). The Russia of 2008 was thus equated to the Russia of 1917 by Voina with respect to government attitudes towards the Russian population and its interests.

The history of Lenin was used in Zoa-Art’s stencil graffiti “Lenin Was an Extremist” to comment on the treatment of political activists in contemporary Russia. Although Lenin was never arrested for participation in a demonstration (since he was not a street politician), the Soviet narratives of his life included stories about the persecution that Lenin suffered as a result of his political activism prior to 1917. According to Zoa (2021), the purpose of the artwork was to depict the Bolshevik leader in the context of post-Soviet Russia, where political activists were persecuted just as Lenin was prior to 1917. The presence of two uniformed policemen in the artwork clearly shows that contemporary political activists are persecuted by the agents of the Russian state, and the face of Lenin reminds the viewer of the imperial government’s role in the persecution of revolutionaries before 1917. In this way, Zoa-Art’s artwork highlights the fact that political activists have always been persecuted by the Russian state.

The oppression of political activists became a popular topic in Russian protest art after the protests of the winter of 2011–2012 began and many activists had been arrested. In their LiveJournal post discussing the release of the song “Putin Pissed Himself,” Pussy Riot used the history of Soviet dissidents to explore the oppression of political prisoners and regular citizens in post-Soviet Russia. The historical narrative constructed by the group focused on martyrdom in a similar manner to the narratives of revolutionary history constructed in connection with other artworks. Pussy Riot elaborated on the different kinds of punishment experienced by dissidents as a result of their participation in the protest action of 1968. This historical narrative enabled the group to highlight the role of the security forces of the country, which are “direct descendants” of the Soviet security forces in terms of being responsible for the cruel treatment of political prisoners. In addition, Pussy Riot referred to the forced psychiatric treatment that was often used to punish political activism in the Soviet Union in the song’s lyrics. Members of the group claim that the attitude of the authorities toward regular Russian citizens has not changed since the Soviet period, as Russian citizens have always been treated as “mentally ill and not capable of making their own decisions.” In this way, Pussy Riot made it clear that the security forces of the Soviet and post-Soviet states (and their respective governments) have always oppressed political activists and deprived regular Russian citizens of their political rights.

In Mikaela’s artwork “Narodovolki,” the history of revolutionary women is used to provide commentary on the fates of female political activists. The artist drew a parallel between female political activists of the past and present by making a direct statement about their similarities in her interview with Ravnopravka (2012). The focus of the work on the judicial sentences received by the
revolutionary women creates a parallel between female political activists of the past and Pussy Riot, whose trial, according to Mikaela’s LiveJournal, had concluded just a few weeks before the artwork was created. In the interview, Mikaela made it clear that the revolutionary women whom she depicted in the artwork were persecuted by the authorities both before 1917 and after the Bolsheviks had come to power. Mikaela thus showed that politically active women have always been persecuted in Russia, regardless of the ideology of the state.

In all of the cases discussed in this section, artists used the history of revolution and dissent to show that the contemporary Russian government and its various agents and institutions have been responsible for the persecution and oppression of groups of Russian citizens, even extending to the entire population of the country. The historical parallels aided the artists in demonstrating that the oppressive character of the post-Soviet Russian government has not been exceptional, since similar persecution and oppression have always occurred in Russian history. In this manner, the protest artworks I have discussed have challenged the official historical narrative that has presented Russian history as one thousand years of harmony between a strong state and the people, with the idea of the strong state being an essential feature of Russian national identity. In contrast, the protest artworks demonstrate that the Russian state, regardless of political regime or form of government, has always been oppressive and detached from the country’s citizens and their interests.

Using history to call for protest

Narratives of the history of revolution and dissent have been used by some artists to endorse protest as a meaningful action. This has been undertaken by: (1) contrasting the political passivity of Russian society in the 2000s with the political activism of the past; (2) showing that protest can be a solution to the problems identified by the artists; and (3) directly calling for protest. In this section, I analyze uses of the history of revolution and dissent in all of these cases.

During their action “In Memory of the Decembrists,” members of Voina held up a rainbow banner bearing the phrase “Pestel’ Did Not Fucking Fall.” According to Plutser-Sarno’s LiveJournal, the slogan was intended to communicate that “the ideas of the Russian patriot [Pestel’] have been forgotten.” This illustrates the attitudes of contemporary Russians (the authorities and regular citizens) to “the heroic winnings of the revolutionary aristocrats, the historical experience of their struggle,” according to Plutser-Sarno. By using the Soviet narrative of the Decembrists as heroes of the past, Voina thus suggested that contemporary Russians were oblivious to the country’s revolutionary legacy, and politically passive due to this.

In their LiveJournal post about “Free the Cobblestones,” Pussy Riot articulated their view on the political passivity of Russia’s population by referencing the Arab Spring. According to the group’s LiveJournal page, the Arab Spring showed that Russia lacked “political emancipation” and “audacity.” Pussy Riot thus contrasted the political activism of the Middle East and North Africa with the lack thereof in Russia, and expressed a hope that their own country would follow in the footsteps of the ones where the Arab Spring took place.

A similarly critical attitude towards the political passivity of the Russian population is expressed in the second version of Zoa-Art’s graffiti “Lenin Was an Extremist,” created after the protests of 2011–2012 began. The words “Don’t you care?” that appeared in this version of the artwork can be interpreted as a remark on the general public’s indifference to the arrest of politically active citizens taking place at the time, who are positioned as being analogous to the character of “Lenin” depicted in the artwork.

In their action “Storming the White House,” Voina showed that protest can be a solution to the central problem highlighted by the artists – the existence of an authoritarian regime that oppresses its citizens. By performing the history of the October Revolution and successfully entering the grounds of the White House, Voina demonstrated that a revolution similar to that of 1917 was possible in post-Soviet Russia. It is well known to the population of Russia that the revolutionary events of October 1917 resulted in the downfall of the inefficient Provisional Government. Using the
history of this revolution in their action, Voina thus reminded their audience that revolution can lead to desirable political change.

In their LiveJournal post dedicated to the song “Putin Pissed Himself,” Pussy Riot used the Arab Spring to show that protest can lead to changes, even in Russia. According to the group, “Kropotkin-Vodka” (i.e. the revolutionary will) had held sway over the corrupt Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak and Libya’s long-time dictator Muammar Gaddafi, both of whom were deposed by the population of their respective countries during the Arab Spring. Pussy Riot also highlighted the fact that nothing presaged the downfall of these regimes, even a few months before the revolutionary events took place. They compared the situations in Russia and North Africa, claiming that the corrupt Russian political regime was in crisis and that Putin was worried about facing a similar fate to that of Mubarak and Gaddafi. By comparing the contemporary political regime in Russia with the corrupt political regimes of North Africa that were successfully overthrown, Pussy Riot showed that protests against authoritarian regimes can lead to political change.

The history of revolution and dissent was also used (or deliberately not used) in the protest artworks as direct calls for protest. However, the artists seem to have differed concerning the form that political protest should take. At the beginning of the period studied in the article, the artists called for revolution. For example, Voina’s recreation of the revolutionary events of 1917 in “Storming the White House” can be interpreted as a call for revolution: the action was dubbed by Plutser-Sarno a “training exercise to assess the tactical efficiency of the activists.” The performance demonstrated that it was practically possible to enter the grounds of the White House and thus behave in the same way as past revolutionaries, and so undertake a new revolution.

In connection with the release of “Free the Cobblestones,” Pussy Riot explicitly called for a revolution in Russia. Although the music video was released on the anniversary of the October Revolution, the group clearly tried to avoid any association between their action and the Bolshevik Revolution. Firstly, while the group stated that the video was being released “on the day of Revolution,” they did so without mentioning the Bolsheviks’ role in that event. Secondly, on their LiveJournal Pussy Riot explained that the pink flag that one of the group’s members can be seen waving in the video symbolizes the future punk-feminist revolution. The history of the October Revolution was thus deliberately not used by Pussy Riot to call for a feminist revolution. This non-use of the history of the October Revolution must be connected to the unwillingness of the group’s members to associate their message with the October Revolution, which is tightly linked in the minds of the population to the Soviet regime.

Such open calls for revolution do not appear in Pussy Riot’s later artworks (or in any other artworks analyzed for this study). Instead, the group often used the history of the Arab Spring to call for the occupation of public spaces in Russia: in “Free the Cobblestones,” for example, there is a call to “create Tahrir on Red Square,” i.e. to occupy the central square of Moscow in the same way Egyptian protesters occupied Tahrir Square. This call to occupy public spaces was repeated in Pussy Riot’s LiveJournal posts dedicated to their other songs, and in an interview for the St. Petersburg Times. The narrative of the occupation of a central square, which led to the Egyptian protesters’ success during the Arab Spring, was thus presented in the Russian context.

In their third song, “Death to Prison, Freedom to Protest,” the call to “occupy a square” was not explicitly connected to the Arab Spring. This shift may have been in response to the negative reactions that the group received concerning their uses of the history of the Arab Spring. For their next song, “Putin Pissed Himself,” Pussy Riot used the history of the Soviet dissidents, with particular reference to their action of 1968 on Red Square to call for the occupation of key locations in the city and demand political change. In their LiveJournal post dedicated to this song, the group described the dissidents’ action as a “sitting protest action.” The song’s lyrics urge people to go and “live” in Red Square, indirectly invoking the narrative of Tahrir Square. By representing both Soviet dissidents and Egyptian protesters as activists occupying the central squares of their respective countries, Pussy Riot created an equivalence between the two groups, and demonstrated that protest in the form of
occupying a city square was not limited to Egypt, but a part of Russian history that could happen again.

In summary, the protest artists used the history of revolution and dissent to challenge passive acceptance of non-democratic developments on the part of Russia’s population. Moreover, they used this history to promote the idea of protesting the shortcomings of the ruling authoritarian regime. Regardless of the form of protest that was encouraged – be it a full-scale revolution or a peaceful occupation of Red Square – a common historical narrative is present in all of the artworks discussed. They endorse protest as a better option than obedience to a strong state (as promoted by the ruling regime in the official historical narrative), and so question the “strong state” as an ideal.

Conclusions

This study has shown that Russian protest artists with differing political ideologies used the history of revolution and dissent to challenge and undermine the official historical narrative promoted by the Russian state. According to the protest artworks, the purported spiritual unity of the Russian state and population, promoted in the official historical narrative, has never existed. On the contrary, Russian history since at least the beginning of the nineteenth century has been characterized by a continuous struggle between an oppressive state and a civil society that longs for freedom.

The uses of history identified in this article assist the artists in showing that the Russian state has always been oppressive towards the Russian people. This challenges the official view regarding the ideal of a strong state as an essential part of Russian national identity. Furthermore, the uses of the history of revolution and dissent enable these artists to question the diktat of obedience to the strong state (as promoted by the authorities), and to endorse the people’s struggle against it. The ideals promoted by Russian protest art discussed in this article are thus diametrically opposed to the ideals promoted by the ruling regime.

The above-mentioned historical narrative and ideals were common to all of the protest artworks discussed in this article, despite the ideological differences among their creators. This implies the existence of a common historical consciousness on the part of the artists. The uses of the history of revolution and dissent by the protest artists correspond well to its use by protesters and political opposition in general as described by other researchers (see Erlikh 2008, 120; Malinova 2015, 53; Miller 2018, 177–178; Volkov 2012, 167–168). In general, the historical consciousness of the protest artists identified in this article corresponds well to Volkov’s (2012, 175) claim that protesters with differing political ideologies have been united by their highly negative attitude towards those in power. The historical narratives of the protest artists, which highlight the oppressive character of the state and necessity to protest against it, can be readily interpreted as an expression of collective anger with the Russian government. This similarity indicates the existence of a common historical consciousness on the part of those who opposed the regime during Medvedev’s presidency and the protests of 2011–2012.

Notes

1. According to Etkind (2017, 2), some of the protest rallies were estimated to involve 60,000–100,000 participants.
2. Voina [war] was formed in February 2007 by a group of philosophy students and split up in 2009 (Jonson 2015, 150–151).
3. Stencil graffiti is a street art technique that has been employed by Russian street artists to create highly visible artwork quickly. Stencils are often cut from a sheet of cardboard with a razor in the outline of the intended design, and allow the artist to paint the same image repeatedly in the public space (Lerner 2021, 1764; Zimberg 2012, 8).
4. NBP was founded in the mid-1990s in an attempt to combine radical right-wing and left-wing ideologies (Fenghi 2020, 7). The party’s main goal is the implementation of radical action and the use of all possible forms of political protest to change the political regime in Russia (Linchenko and Anikin 2020, 362).
5. Pussy Riot was formed by several Voina members at the end of September 2011, i.e. soon after Putin announced his plan to return to the presidency. The group became world famous after its five members staged an illegal performance in the soles of Moscow Cathedral of Christ the Savior on February 21, 2012. In March 2012, three Pussy Riot members were arrested and charged with “hooliganism,” and were later sentenced to two years of imprisonment (Gradskova, Sandomirskaja, and Petrusenko 2013).

6. The popularity of the artworks by Voina and Pussy Riot is illustrated by the number of times the YouTube videos of their performances have been viewed. As of 12 August 2022, “In Memory of the Decembrists” had been viewed 207,376 times, “Storming the White House” 27884 times, “Free the Cobblestones” 321,352 times, “Kropotkin Vodka” 1,208,366 times, “Death to Prison, Freedom to Protest” 215,930 times, and “Putin Pissed Himself” 503,702 times. The works of Zoa-Art and Mikaela have not received the same extent of response on social media, but they have been discussed in online journals and newspapers (see, e.g. Partizan 2015; Ravnopravka 2012). Note that “Lenin Was an Extremist” appeared in a music video by the popular rock group Lyapis Trubetskoy.

7. According to Igor Ponomov (2016), many street artists consider representation of their works on the internet to be more important than the originals since the originals are more prone to disappearing.

8. Colonel Pavel Pestel’ (1793–1826) was the leader of the Decembrists’ Southern Society and the architect of a republican project for political, social, and economic reform called Russkaya Pravda [The Russian Truth]. He was one of the five Decembrists who were executed (O’Meara 2003).

9. “Pestel’ na khui ne upal.” This slogan referred to a famous incident that took place during the execution when three of the five ropes used to hang the Decembrists broke. Consequently, three Decembrists fell to the ground during the execution. The rope that was used to execute Pestel’ did not break and, thus, he was one of the two Decembrists who did not fall.

10. The song and music video are dedicated to the famous battleship Potemkin, a symbol of the Russian Revolution of 1905.

11. “Ni pri chem?”.

12. On 14 December 2004, several members of the NBP occupied the Presidential Reception Office for 40 minutes. Because of the date on which the action took place, the members of the NBP were compared to the Decembrists by some journalists (Erlikh 2008, 114, 115; Fenghi 2020, 123–124).

13. For more on Kropotkin, see Cahm (1989).

14. Vorotnikov’s words do not strictly correlate with the anarchism and libertarianism propounded by Voina. His words are an example of so-called stëb, which is defined by Alexei Yurchak (2006, 250) as a genre of humor that “differed from sarcasm, cynicism, derision or any of the more familiar genres of absurd humor” since it “required such a degree of overidentification with the object, person or an idea at which [it] was directed that it was often impossible to tell whether it was a form of sincere support, subtle ridicule, or a peculiar mixture of the two.”

15. Plutser-Sarno’s words also serve as a reminder of Vladimir Mayakovsky’s famous lyrics, written in September or October 1917 and later included in his poem “Vladimir Ilyich Lenin” (1924) as the voice of the workers during the revolutionary year: “Guzzle your pineapples, swill your champagne, your last day has come, bourgeois, never again!” (Mayakovsky [1924] 1965, 297).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This work is a part of the research project “Narratives of Revolutionary Struggle and Construction of Post-Soviet Identities in Russia (1991–2018)” supported by The Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies, Sweden (grant 2019-0053).

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