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THE RUSSIAN “MATILDA” CONTROVERSY: THE POLITICS OF RELIGIOUS FEELINGS

by *Kristina Stoeckl* | ελληνικά | русский



Karl Marx famously said that history repeats itself, first as tragedy, second as farce. The truth of this statement can be witnessed these days in Russia when looking at the controversies surrounding the film *Matilda*, due to show in Russian cinemas on October 26th, 2017. The street protests of groups of Orthodox believers, the charges launched against its director Aleksej Uchitel by conservative politicians, two cars set on fire by a group that calls itself “Christian State – Holy Russia,” and a parliamentary commission that hastens to “[examine](#)” the film only to find it harmless...

Matilda is public upheaval over "offense of religious feelings" as a farce. The tragedy dates back to 2012 and revolved around the Pussy Riot incident.

A short reminder: In spring and summer 2012, the Russian and quickly also the global public was divided over the controversial performance of a group of young women, who had entered the altar space of Moscow's Christ Savior Cathedral in colorful dress and masks, staged what they later entitled "a punk prayer," and put a video of the performance on YouTube. Three of the band members were eventually arrested and put on trial on charges of "extremism and hooliganism," two were sentenced to two years of prison, one was released on bail. In the wake of this event, the Russian Duma amended free speech legislation and turned "the offense of religious feelings" into a crime. The law has since been invoked several times: against the stage performance of Richard Wagner's [Tannhäuser](#) at Novosibirsk's State Opera and Ballet Theatre in 2015 or against a [Pokemon-Go](#) playing Russian blogger in 2017, who played the popular game inside Yekaterinburg's Church of All Saints. But it is the latest scandal over an alleged offense of religious feelings surrounding the film Matilda which closes the circle back to Pussy Riot.

For those readers who may not have followed the events: [Matilda](#) is a historical movie about the love affair of the future Tsar Nicholas II with the ballet dancer Matilda Kschessinka. The film covers the time span from 1890 until 1896 and does not touch Nicholas II's rule and his death, when, along with his family, he was killed by Bolsheviks in 1918. The whole family was canonized by the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad in 1981 and by the Russian Orthodox Church in 2000. Even before reaching Russian cinemas, the film about the last Tsar's pre-marital affair has stirred heated controversies. Conservative Orthodox believers called the film "blasphemous," because the pre-release trailer shows the Russian ruler and future saint in sex scenes and emotional turmoil over his romantic love for the ballet dancer and his *raison d'état*-marriage with Princess Alexandra of Hesse.

The striking parallel between Matilda and Pussy Riot concerns the fact that today, just like five years ago, the alleged offense of religious feelings is intimately connected with the figure of the Russian ruler. The punk prayer's "Mother of God, banish Putin" was a direct attack on Vladimir Putin, who had just been reelected to presidency in 2012. In the context of continuing street protests in Moscow in the winter of 2011/12, the message was highly political. Matilda allegedly harms the saintly image of the last Russian Tsar.

In both cases, the critics bemoan the "insult of religious feelings". But what is so special about the feelings of Orthodox believers for their rulers? How are we to make sense of this panic over *lèse-majesté* ("injured majesty," the insulting of a monarch), over the violation of the dignity of the sovereign, as a form of blasphemy?

From the perspective of Orthodox believers, the Pussy Riot controversy had a tragic political dimension. The event posed the question whether the language of political protest could have a place inside their Church. Many Orthodox believers probably felt that, in principle, it should, but few could support the kind of articulation staged by the rebellious performers. Some, like Diakon Kuraev, tried to find a way around it by arguing that the incidence had taken place in the week of Russian Carnival. The tragic dimension of the controversy and court trial following the group's

performance lay precisely in the alienation of those open-minded Orthodox believers who felt that, at the end of the day, maybe some criticism of close church-state relations was not entirely out of place. Whoever did not feel offended in his or her religious feelings, such was the message at the court trial, was not a [true Orthodox believer](#). (Also for the convicted women and their families the consequences of the performance were tragic, however, my point here is about the Orthodox believers.)

From the perspective of Orthodox believers, today's Matilda controversy must seem like a farce. Orthodox believers in 21st century Russia are to feel offended in their religious feelings because a Russian ruler, who was canonized as passion bearer for the way he died and not for the way he lived, is depicted in an unsaintly fashion in a romanticized biopic? Really?

As a matter of fact, the offended Orthodox so far occupy a small niche. The group is headed by Natalia Poklonskaya, a member of parliament with Putin's ruling United Russia party, who has released several statements that she believes the film insults the feelings of religious believers. The bomb-threats against cinemas and the attempted arson attack on the film studio were apparently committed by a group that has proclaimed itself "[Christian State - Holy Russia](#)," led by Alexander Kalinin, who was detained by Russian authorities in September. Kalinin, as it later became known, has served eight years in prison for murder and was allegedly converted to Orthodoxy after a near-death experience. The Russian Minister of Culture publicly defended the film, and the commission created by him to examine the film concluded that there was nothing to object. The Russian Orthodox Church has condemned the violence, but has not dissociated itself from the substance of the criticism. Metropolitan Ilarion, who is one of the few who has actually seen the film already, [said](#) that he found it vulgar and denigrating of the image of Nicholas II and his wife. "The anniversary of the revolution is an occasion for prayer and commemoration," he said, "and not for spitting on their memory." However, the Moscow Patriarchate did not call for banning or censoring the film.

Lèse-majesté in 21st century Russia, whether it concerns past or living rulers, is a serious matter. Orthodox believers in 2012 may have felt tragically impotent in front of a critical cause raised in the wrong manner; in 2017 they are probably just incredulous.

And what does this mean for the Russian Orthodox Church? In 2012, it was the Russian state that acted as protector of the Church and sanctioned the unruly intrusion of aggressive protesters. In 2017, is it again the Russian state that draws the line between permissible and impermissible religious protest, arrests the extremists of the Christian State and will, with all likelihood, make sure that public viewing of the film is safe. It is the Russian state that is trimming the very left and the very right edges of the Orthodox opinion spectrum. The Moscow Patriarchate just needs to keep the middle ground.

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This publication has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (POSEC, grant agreement no. ERC-STG-2015-676804).

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