

UPCOMING EVENTS

Thursday, February 26th, 7:30 PM. Monthly Meeting. We meet at the Caltech Y, Tyson House, 505 S. Wilson Ave., Pasadena. (This is just south of the corner with San Pasqual. Signs will be posted.) We will be planning our activities for the coming months. Please join us! Refreshments provided.

Tuesday, March 10, 7:30 PM. Letter writing meeting at Caltech Athenaeum, corner of Hill and California in Pasadena. This informal gathering is a great way for newcomers to get acquainted with Amnesty.

Sunday, March 15, 6:30 PM. Rights Readers Human Rights Book Discussion group. This month we read "Words will Break Cement: the Passion of Pussy Riot" by Masha Gessen.

COORDINATOR'S CORNER

Hi All

Gung Hoy Fat Choi to our Chinese friends as Chinese New Year was last week.

Here's hoping our Chinese POC, [Gao Zhisheng](#), will be able to join his wife and children in the US soon. He has been released from prison, but the authorities are keeping a close watch on him.

Con Cariño,

Kathy

RIGHTS READERS

Human Rights Book Discussion Group

Keep up with Rights Readers at
<http://rightsreaders.blogspot.com>

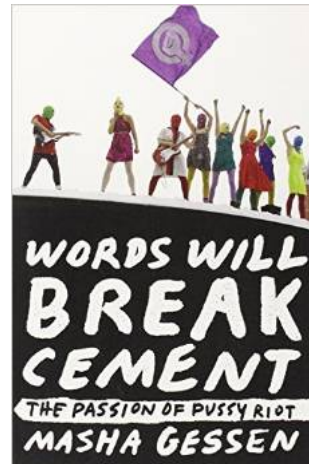
Next Rights Readers meeting:

Sunday, March 15, 6:30 PM

Vroman's Bookstore

695 E. Colorado, Pasadena

BOOK REVIEW by Anne Applebaum
The Washington Post, Feb 13, 2014



*Words Will Break
Cement: The Passion
of Pussy Riot*

by Masha Gessen

What makes someone into a dissident? Why do some people give up everything — home, family, job — to embark on a career of protest? Or, to put it differently, why, on Feb. 21, 2012, did a

group of young Russian women put on short dresses and colored tights, place neon-hued balaclavas over their faces, walk into the Cathedral of Christ the Savior and mount the altar? And why — although they knew that their compatriots would be indifferent and that arrest might follow — did they begin to sing: *Virgin Mary, Mother of God, Banish Putin Banish Putin, Banish Putin!*

In "Words Will Break Cement," an investigation of the origins and motivations of Pussy Riot, the art-punk group that staged this famous performance, Masha Gessen set out to answer this question. She met several of the women in person and corresponded with two others, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Maria Alyokhin, while they were in prison. She met some of their parents and husbands, in various stages of estrangement, and in one case a daughter.

"Words Will Break Cement: The Passion of Pussy Riot" by Masha Gessen. (Riverhead) Gessen's book in fact begins with Tolokonnikova's 4-year-old daughter, Gera, who was bored and fidgety on the 11-hour drive to Mordovia. She was on her way to visit her mother in a labor camp. Gessen sat with the family during that drive and during their four-hour visit, in a tiny rectangular room divided by a tall desk. The desk was manned by a prison officer who after some time agreed, reluctantly, to let a sulky Gera sit on her mother's lap. The conversation ranged from Gera's favorite foods to the nature of truth, the subversion of language and the ways in which the Russian

political system is reflected in Russian prison regulations.

Later, at one of many tedious hearings on her prison conduct, Tolokonnikova expanded further on some of these themes. When guards accused her of refusing to participate in camp activities — including, incredibly, a prisoners' "Miss Charm" contest — she made a speech: "I assert that it is the principles in accordance with which I conduct my life — feminist, anti-patriarchal, and aesthetically non-conformist principles — that are the basis for boycotting the Miss Charm contest."

Her conversation alternates between mundane, profound and pretentious. Gessen, here as elsewhere in this excellent short account, doesn't hesitate to show all these sides of her heroines' lives. She takes them seriously but understands how odd they all seem in the idea-free zone that is Vladimir Putin's Russia, and how peculiar their philosophical evolution. Having grown up without ideology, they struggled in different ways against boring schools, feckless parents, pervasive alcoholism. The 24-year-old Tolokonnikova grew up in the Arctic town of Norilsk, and her grandfather was a gulag guard; as a teenager, she taught herself existentialism. Another group member studied engineering and worked on nuclear submarines before quitting and drifting into art photography. Alyokhin, now 25, became an activist because she heard that a national park she loved was being handed over to developers: "I found two telephone numbers and addresses on the internet, packed a knapsack, and, straight from college, went to the offices of the World Wildlife Fund and Greenpeace."

These three women and a handful of others wound up meeting in various Moscow apartments and art schools, where they eventually conceived the songs and "actions" that became the works of Pussy Riot, a group of one or two dozen women (the numbers change). They had no money, no backers. They were sustained in part by a feeling of camaraderie, though that was elusive: As the group constantly redefined itself, the members quarreled, disagreeing about legal and artistic tactics.

They also kept going because of what Gessen calls "Theory" with a capital T. In a country where the government controls the media, political parties are often fictitious and election campaigns are controlled theatrical productions, it can be hard to express political opposition.

Pussy Riot decided to do so using the language of Western radical feminism: Unable to fight the system openly, they gained energy from their determination to fight it aesthetically, as conceptual artists and shock performers. If Red Square was a symbol of power, they would perform a song called "Putin Pissed Himself" there. If Putin wanted to co-opt the church as a form of support, then they would use the church as a site of protest, too.

Paradoxically, the regime helped spread their fame. Though the experience of prison was harrowing, though it took a huge toll on Gera, the long labor-camp sentences that Alyokhin and Tolokonnikova received for their cathedral performance made both women into international celebrities. After their release they went on an American tour, where they performed with Madonna and appeared on "The Colbert Report."

As Gessen demonstrates, the experiences of trial and prison also gave these two women a much deeper education in political dissidence. While in prison, they encountered the Russian legal system and learned how to manipulate it. Gessen gives a particularly brilliant account of their trials, which followed very much in the tradition of the dissident show trials of the Soviet past. In an attempt to undermine the legitimacy of the court, the accused would refuse to understand the charges or would question the nature of the accusation or of the criminality of her crime. Later, they issued protests from prison, conducted hunger strikes and in some cases tried to organize other inmates, just as the Soviet dissidents did once upon a time.

The question now is whether they can broaden their message — or if they even want to. Certainly Pussy Riot appeals to Western hipsters: These women will always be welcome at a certain kind of gathering in Moscow or in Manhattan. But there isn't much evidence that they appeal to the Russian heartland. Until now, that wasn't the point: Pussy Riot was conceived as an art collective, not a political movement, and most of its still-anonymous members want it to stay that way. Recently, several of them disowned Alyokhin and Tolokonnikova because they participated in an Amnesty International concert in New York. The group's members could not become "institutionalized advocates of prisoners' rights," they wrote. True Pussy Riot performances could only be "illegal" and

conducted in defiance of convention and institutions of all kinds.

Gessen doesn't claim that Pussy Riot will ever move beyond these unconventional goals, and her book doesn't hold up its members as any kind of ideal. But one senses her desire for the book's two central heroines to evolve and to become real leaders, even if only to inspire others. In the epilogue, she describes another one of the group's members who had been half-involved, who had stayed away from the cathedral performance and yet who was, when Gessen met her, fervently hoping that Alyokhin and Tolokonnikova would soon be released: She very much wanted to be part of something — anything — once again.

There are so many drifting, disillusioned young people in Russia, and so many of them are also waiting to be part of something. If only the "passion of Pussy Riot" could be somehow organized and directed, Gessen hints, then it might make a difference.

Anne Applebaum writes a biweekly foreign affairs column for The Washington Post. She is also the Director of the Global Transitions Program at the Legatum Institute in London.

AUTHOR BIO



Maria Alexandrovna Gessen, born 13 January 1967), better known as Masha Gessen, is a Russian and American journalist, author, and activist noted for her opposition to Russian President Vladimir Putin. Gessen identifies as a lesbian and has written extensively on LGBT rights and help founded the Pink Triangle Campaign. She has been described as "Russia's leading LGBT rights activist" and has said herself that for many years she was "probably the only publicly out gay person in the whole country." Gessen writes primarily in English but also in her native Russian, and in addition to writing books on Putin and Russian feminist punk rock protest group Pussy Riot, she has been a prolific contributor to such publications as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *The New Republic*, *New Statesman*, *Granta*, *Slate*, *Vanity Fair*, and *U.S. News & World Report*.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Masha_Gessen

SECURITY WITH HUMAN RIGHTS

by Robert Adams

AIUSA released the following press release on February 17, 2015:

Amnesty International USA Expresses Concern Ahead of White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism

Washington – Today the Obama administration will begin its three-day summit on "Countering Violent Extremism." Tomorrow will consist of meetings with civil society focusing on domestic, international and private companies' roles and on Thursday the State Department is scheduled to meet with both civil society groups and government representatives, with government representatives from as many as 67 countries expected.

Amnesty International USA expressed its concern that the Obama administration is positioning itself as a world leader in promotion of global counter-radicalization efforts but failing to encourage human rights protections.

"The administration has a responsibility to prevent counter-radicalization from becoming a pretext for the targeting of human rights defenders and repression of peaceful dissent. The end result of this summit must include guidelines for ensuring U.S. support to foreign governments does not facilitate human rights abuses," said Amnesty International USA executive director Steven W. Hawkins.

Amnesty International USA pointed to the fact that many U.S. partners, such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, are governments with records of using anti-terrorism laws to intimidate internal critics and repress peaceful dissent. By inviting representatives of these governments to DC this week, the administration is sending a troubling message of tolerance for their records of human rights abuses.

The White House and State Department should be clear on whether, as part of global Countering Violent Extremism efforts, the U.S. will fund foreign governments, provide security assistance or increase intelligence sharing with abusive governments.

Amnesty International USA remains deeply concerned that U.S. funding and support will be

used by foreign governments to commit human rights violations against dissidents and human rights defenders, including disappearances, incommunicado detention and torture. The U.S. needs to commit to a set of rules and due diligence to ensure this doesn't happen. Given the array of foreign governments that will be attending, the White House must also condemn the post-Charlie Hebdo crackdowns on freedom of expression in Europe.

The administration has yet to respond to a December 2014 letter Amnesty International USA signed along with two dozen other human rights, civil liberties and community-based groups, explaining that without safeguards, Countering Violent Extremism programs in U.S. cities may produce a climate of fear where people must watch what they say, lest it be reported by their neighbors to police as vaguely "suspicious."

The Obama administration must also do far more to rein in the FBI's abusive practices in American Muslim communities, including expansive surveillance and aggressive use of informants.

PRISONER OF CONSCIENCE
Gao Zhisheng
by Joyce Wolf

On Feb. 9, Radio Free Asia published an interview with Geng He with recent news about her husband Gao Zhisheng:
<http://www.rfa.org/english/women/recovery-02092015110136.html>

(China released human rights lawyer Gao from prison last August. After suffering years of brutal torture, he now lives under constant police surveillance in the home of his wife's parents in Xinjiang Province. Geng He and their children escaped to the US in 2009.)

Geng He reported that Gao's condition is gradually improving. "His speech faculties have returned to a reasonable degree. He can communicate with the kids. There are still a lot of words he doesn't know how to write, but he's recovering slowly."

She said, "When he got out of prison, I asked my sister to send me some photos of Gao Zhisheng, but she never did, and I was mad at her about that. Later, I found out that photos of Gao at that

time would have been unbearable to look at. He didn't even look human any more."

Although he still has very serious problems with his teeth, Gao is now able to enjoy reading. "He never had time for reading when he was working as a lawyer, and he wasn't able to read during the eight or nine years that he was disappeared or locked up. To use his expression, he has a voracious appetite for books, and that's what he spends a lot of time doing right now."

Geng He concluded, "I have given up hope [that we will one day be reunited as a family]. I am happy enough that I'm able to talk to him by phone. This is already a huge source of support to me. I daren't hope for anything more, although I can't help wishing it."

Ten members of Group 22 signed a Lunar New Year card for Geng He with messages of encouragement and support. May the Year of the Sheep finally bring reunion with his wife and daughter and son to Gao Zhisheng!

If you are on Facebook, you might want to "Like" this page for Gao Zhisheng:
<https://www.facebook.com/GaoZhishengLawyer>

If you are on Twitter, Geng He posts in Chinese at <https://twitter.com/GengHe1>

DEATH PENALTY NEWS
By Stevi Carroll

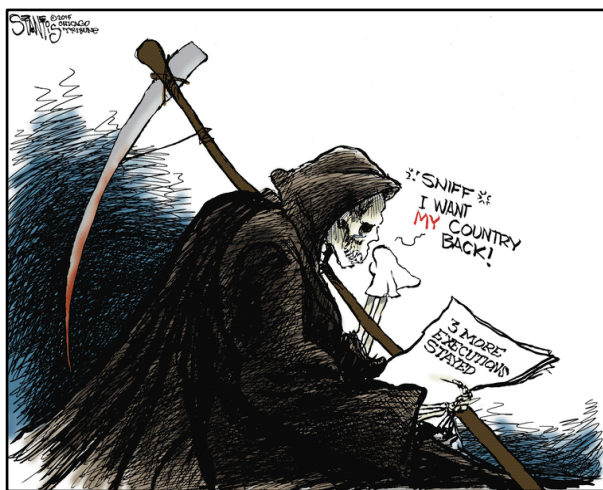
What a Difference a Stay Can Make

Both Pennsylvania and Ohio will move through 2015 without executing anyone. The stays of execution hinge on the drug protocol used to kill and the efficacy of the procedure. The Ohio officials await new drugs to do the deed while Pennsylvania's governor, Tom Wolf, wants to review a report on capital punishment in his state.

Governor Wolf has come to see the death penalty as "an endless cycle of court proceedings as well as ineffective, unjust, and expensive." He is also aware that six people on death row in Pennsylvania have been exonerated. Nationwide six people on death row were exonerated in 2014.

In January 2014, the Supreme Court agreed to hear a challenge brought by four inmates to Oklahoma’s lethal injection procedure.

While attitudes toward the death penalty continue to be almost an even 50-50, this discussion may help to move abolition forward. As editorial cartoonist Scott Stantis said in an email to me, “Let’s hope we are witnessing the beginning of the end of this barbaric practice in our country.”



used with permission - Scott Stantis

Who Can Still Be Executed?

In *Atkins v. Virginia*, 2002, the Supreme Court ruled that ‘mentally retarded’ people can not be executed. The IQ cutoff point is 70. As with so many ‘standardized’ tests, an IQ test can have a deviation of five points up or down.

Warren Hill’s IQ was 70 which put him in the bottom two percent of the population. In 2000, the prosecution said that because Mr. Hill was able to enlist in the Navy (this brings up other questions for me that have nothing to do with the death penalty), have a girlfriend, and hold down a job, his IQ score should not prevent his execution. It did not and he was executed January 27th.

Robert Ladd scored 67 on his IQ test, but for the state of Texas this did not ‘satisfy his threshold burden on his claim of mental retardation.’ He was executed January 29th. Somehow the Texas court used Lennie from John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* as their yardstick to decide Mr. Ladd was competent enough to be killed by the State. To heck with the Supremes’ 2002 ruling.

Just Mercy

I know those of us who belong to Amnesty International seem to attract many of the sorrows of our world. We read about oppression, torture, murder, and work to rectify these tribulations. A couple of weeks ago, my young friend Reilly Brown who’s a sophomore at Occidental College asked me if I’d read *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson. No, I had not. As luck would have it, I was heading up to the Bay Area on a road trip and my public library had an audio copy of the book read by the author. This book is the vitamin supplement to put the spring back into any fatigued activist’s heart.

Bryan Stevenson is a lawyer who founded the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Alabama. He and his staff have worked on death penalty cases and juvenile life without the possibility of parole cases as well as cases to bring justice to the poor and disenfranchised. *Just Mercy* not only gives vital and vitalizing information but does so through poignant stories, and really, stories are what make us human.

Mr. Stevenson ends his book with: “The power of just mercy is that it belongs to the undeserving. It’s when mercy is least expected that it’s most potent- strong enough to break the cycle of victimization and victimhood, retribution and suffering. It has the power to heal the psychic harm and injuries that lead to aggression and violence, abuse of power, mass incarceration.”

Mr. Stevenson has a TED talk titled “We need to talk about an injustice.” http://www.ted.com/talks/bryan_stevenson_we_need_to_talk_about_an_injustice?language=en

And to find out more about the Equal Justice Initiative, go to <http://www.eji.org/>.

After listening to *Just Mercy*, I am filled again with the hope of making our world a better, more compassionate place. And as fate would have it, the daughter of one of our members, Candy, works with Bryan Stevenson!

Stays of Execution

January		
29	Richard Glossip	OK
February		
10	Stephen West	TN
10	Lester Bower	TX
11	William Montgomery	OH
11	Ronald R. Phillips	OH
19	Tommy Arthur	AL
		(2nd stay granted)

19	John Grant	OK
26	Jerry Correll	FL
March		
4	Terrance Williams	PA
5	Benjamin Cole	OK
5	Kenneth Hairston	PA
10	Alfonso Sanchez	PA
11	Robert Diamond	PA
12	Robert Van Hook	OH
12	Raymond Tibbetts	OH
12	Kevin Mattison	PA
19	Bill Kuenzel	AL (stay likely)

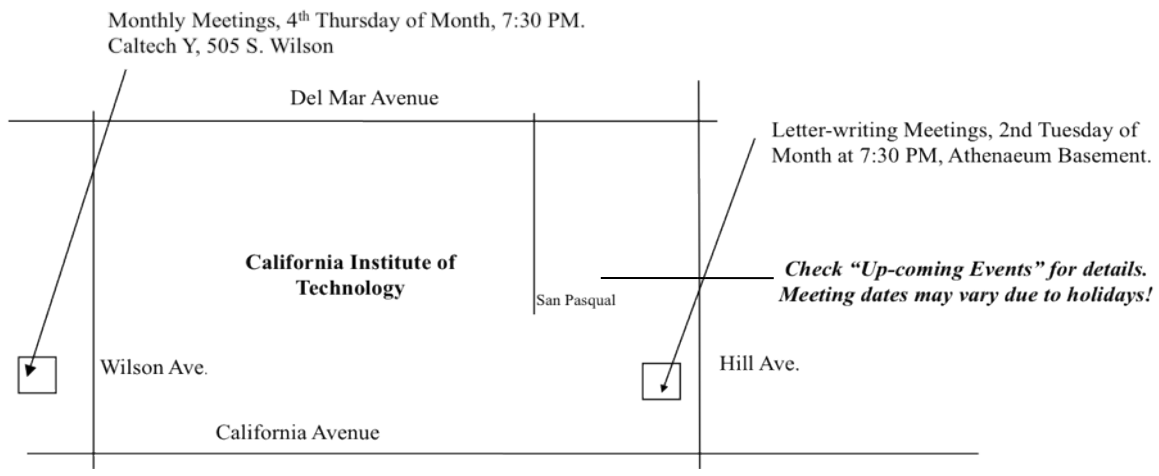
GROUP 22 MONTHLY LETTER COUNT	
UAs	15
POC (New Year card to Geng He)	1
Total	16
To add your letters to the total contact aigp22@caltech.edu	

Executions

January		
21	Arnold Prieto	TX 1-drug* lethal injection
27	Warren Hill	GA 1-drug* lethal injection
29	Robert Ladd	TX 1-drug* lethal injection

February		
4	Donald Newbury	TX 1-drug* lethal injection
11	Walter Storey	MO 1-drug* lethal injection

* pentobarbital



From the 210 exit on Lake Avenue, head south, turn left on Del Mar
 From the 110 continue on Arroyo Parkway north, turn right on California
 Street parking is generally available.

Amnesty International Group 22
 The Caltech Y
 Mail Code C1-128
 Pasadena, CA 91125
www.its.caltech.edu/~aigp22/
<http://rightsreaders.blogspot.com>



Amnesty International's mission is to undertake research and action focused on preventing and ending grave abuses of the rights to physical and mental integrity, freedom of conscience and expression, and freedom from discrimination, within the context of its work to promote all human rights.