

# Reading the Pussy Riot Act

By [Michele A. Berdy](#)

August 02, 2012

**The  Moscow Times**

*Богохульство: blasphemy*

I have been reluctant to wade into the linguistic morass of the Pussy Riot case mostly because I'm not a specialist in religious or legal terminology. But I finally gave in to my curiosity and decided to read обвинительное заключение (indictment).

Half a page into it, the legal language was pretty clear, but my desk was covered with reference books on church and religious terminology. If you're trying to follow the case, it may be helpful to understand a few of the recurring terms.

First, where the action took place. In an Orthodox church, the raised platform in front of the iconostasis is солея (solea). The section of the solea in front of the royal doors is called амвон (ambon).

Then, the cast of witnesses: ключарь (sacristan, ecclesiarch) is the person in charge of caring for the church building and its property. Алтарник (altar server) is a layperson who helps

at the altar during the services. Свечница is a woman selling candles.

And now for the big accusations — the religious ones, I mean. Three words and their derivatives pop out throughout the text: святотатство, богохульство and кощунство, all of which are translated as sacrilege, blasphemy, profanity or desecration. After cross-checking church translations and dipping into pre-revolutionary law, I think I would translate святотатство as desecration, which involves some kind of violation of church property. It was the worst of the pre-revolutionary Russian religious crimes and carried the death penalty for centuries. I'd translate богохульство as blasphemy and кощунство as sacrilege.

This is important to know as you read the legal documents because although the accusation is couched in legal terms, the supporting evidence is largely presented in religious terms.

The women are accused of committing an act of хулиганство, то есть грубое нарушение общественного порядка, выражающее явное неуважение к обществу, совершённое по мотивам религиозной ненависти или вражды либо по мотивам ненависти в отношении какой-либо социальной группы, группой лиц по предварительному сговору (hooliganism, that is, a gross violation of public order expressing a clear disrespect for society, committed on the grounds of religious hatred or enmity or hate against a particular social group by a group of persons by prior agreement).

What did they do it? According to witness testimony — which is exactly the same, word for word, page after page — their behavior was "неподобающее, а фактически нарушало все мыслимые и немыслимые общепринятые правила поведения в Храме" (unbefitting, and in fact violated all imaginable and unimaginable, commonly accepted rules of behavior in a church). They put on clothing "явно и очевидно противоречащую общим церковным правилам" (that clearly and obviously contradicted church rules). Then they "начали бесовски дрыгаться, прыгать, скакать, задирать высоко ноги, мотать головами и одновременно с этим выкрикивали очень оскорбительные, богохульные слова" (started to satanically jerk around, jump, run, kick their legs up, twirl their heads while they shouted very insulting, blasphemous words).

According to the indictment, this led to унижение чувств и верований многочисленных приверженцев православного христианского вероисповедания и умаление духовной основы государства (a violation of the feelings and faith of many Orthodox Christians and a defilement of the spiritual basis of the state).

After reading the indictment and following the trial, I've come to the conclusion that the spiritual basis of the state may indeed have been defiled, but not by Pussy Riot.

Michele A. Berdy, a Moscow-based translator and interpreter, is author of "The Russian Word's Worth" (Glas), a collection of her columns.

*The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.*

Original url: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2012/08/02/reading-the-pussy-riot-act-a16748>