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Tolokonnikova Joins Drive to Abolish British Prison Book Ban

By Jennifer Monaghan

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Pussy Riot member Nadezhda Tolokonnikova (center) has written in support of abolishing a ban on books being sent to British prison inmates.

Pussy Riot member Nadezhda Tolokonnikova has given her backing to a campaign to persuade the British government to overturn a ban on books being sent to prison inmates.

Tolokonnikova, who was incarcerated for nearly two years after performing an anti-Putin song in Moscow's Christ the Savior Cathedral in 2012, was one of 10 writers and activists to call for improved access to books in prisons, The Guardian reported Wednesday.

"Because you have books, you know that every day you spend behind bars is not a day spent in vain," wrote Tolokonnikova, who has become a vocal campaigner for prisoners rights since her release from jail in December under a presidential amnesty.

According to regulations introduced by Westminster last November, British inmates are

banned from receiving parcels sent from outside prison — apart from under "exceptional circumstances" — with books, magazines and clothes all prohibited under the new rules.

British Justice Minister Chris Grayling recently defended the ban in an open letter to poet laureate Carol Ann Duffy, a critic of the ban, saying it was necessary to prevent contraband from being smuggled into prisons.

"When you are free you don't have such a painful desire to read as you have in prison," wrote Belarussian journalist Iryna Khalip, who was detained for criticizing her country's regime. "You can get any book at home, in the shops or from the Internet. In prison books become the air. Your body needs air to breathe. No books — you cannot breathe. And if you cannot breathe there is no life."

Nigerian journalist Kunle Ajibade, who spent 3 ½ years in prison, also criticized the ban, writing: "I bear witness to the therapy that books give in moments of gloom. Why would anyone who truly cares for humanity want to deny a prisoner a mind builder?"

The 10 writers' accounts have been published to coincide with World Book Night, a charitable event held annually on April 23 to encourage open access to literature.

See also:

Pussy Riot Members Slam Amnesty That Freed Them

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