

11 Feminists performing the collective trauma

Inna Perheentupa

A visiting group of Finnish feminists have just presented their activist project to an audience of about 60 in St Petersburg. After the presentation, a woman in her forties stands up to ask, in Russian, how the group could admit men to feminism, ‘since it is supposed to function as a shelter for women’. This question, posed in a tone of clear concern, haunted me long after my fieldwork in Russia. I had never before heard someone associate feminism with a shelter in such a direct manner. I gradually came to apprehend how vital this spatial metaphor is to understanding feminist activism in Russia, the setting for my ethnographic study. The shelter idea, I suggest, is pivotal for examining feminist activism in contemporary Russia and the root causes for the radical forms it takes, often stemming from experiences of gendered violence. The thematics scrutinised in this chapter thus resonate with the #MeToo movement and its aftermath, in which women around the world have become empowered to stand against gendered violence.¹

Feminism has experienced a resurgence of interest in Russia in the 2010s, after a decline in popularity and public visibility that was largely due to paring back of funding for feminist projects earlier in the new millennium (Brygalina & Temkina, 2004; Hemment, 2007; Salmenniemi, 2008). While Pussy Riot is the most well-known contemporary Russian feminist group internationally, the field of feminism in Russia is multifaceted and filled with activists tirelessly seeking opportunities for publicity on the scale achieved by that group with their ‘Punk Prayer’ performance and subsequent imprisonment.² One key reason for feminism’s renewed popularity in Russia, especially among young women in bigger cities, has been the rise of conservative politics. Whereas President Boris Yeltsin’s regime in the 1990s largely failed to develop a ‘national idea’ after the collapse of the Soviet Union, President Vladimir Putin’s government has sought a new basis for legitimacy in a conservative ideology closely connected to nationalist ideas (Temkina & Zdravomyslova, 2014; Sperling, 2015: 126, 274–275). This concerns feminist activists most tangibly through several proposals and laws in the 2010s for limiting reproductive rights and public discussion of non-heterosexuality.³ Valerie Sperling (2015) has pointed out that the success of the Russian government’s patriarchal politics and laws is partially due to the absence of a strong women’s movement. However, the enactment of those laws has sparked a new generation of feminist activists, who at times carry out strikingly confrontational and radical actions.

As Eva Illouz (2008) has highlighted, the feminist and therapeutic discourse have similar starting points – they both encourage working on one’s relationship to oneself. However, relations between the two have been turbulent and dynamic from the beginning. In the 1960s, feminists raced in to challenge sexist forms of therapy and create their own feminist versions of it, ultimately forcing mainstream therapy to update its practices too (Herman, 1995). In fact, some scholars have suggested that, because feminism was so occupied with therapeutic practices of consciousness-raising, it actually lost its political dynamic (Becker, 2005; Cloud, 1998). Others have argued to the contrary that therapeutic strategies, rather than depoliticising feminism, enabled feminists to bring in a novel way of conducting politics (Stein, 2011). I contribute to these debates here by shedding light on how feminist activism in contemporary Russia takes therapeutic and political dimensions simultaneously, forming what I call therapeutic politics. Hence, my main focus is on the way politics and therapeutics come together and manifest themselves in feminist activism produced around activists’ traumatic experiences.

I will begin by discussing the relationship between the feminist and therapeutic discourses. With this background, I can then introduce the research context and material. My analysis is divided into two parts: In the first part, I examine how the ‘shelter’ mentioned above is narratively produced and what kinds of individuals and ideas assemble in this space. With the second part, I turn to how therapeutic elements are combined with public feminist activism.

Feminism, therapeutics, and trauma culture

Feminists were among the first political movements to draw from the therapeutic discourse, in the 20th century (Stein, 2011: 167). As therapy did, feminism offered a cultural resource that ‘invited self-examination, the acknowledgment of past injuries, and the revelation of those injuries to others in order to make sense of oneself’ (ibid.: 187). The feminist and therapeutic discourses shared not only the idea that self-examination liberates but also that of the private sphere and family as the ideal object for transformation aimed at fulfilling individuals’ desires (Illouz, 2008: 122–123).

As Ellen Herman (1995: 302) has shown, therapeutic practice was from the beginning both a friend and a foe for feminists. Conventional modes of therapy were male-dominated and often deeply misogynist and homophobic, as were the modes of psychiatry and psychoanalysis (Staub, 2015: 107). However, in how it construed the ‘female’, the therapeutic establishment, in fact, helped to concretise some of feminism’s main critical arguments along the way, thereby gradually forcing therapy experts to reflect on their sexist practices (Herman, 1995: 281). What may well be characterised as the finest aspects of contemporary therapeutic culture – its democratic and nonhierarchical practices – stem in large part from the advances sought by radical and feminist therapists (Staub, 2015: 107).

The coupling between feminist and therapeutic discourse grew tighter in the 1970s when feminists started politicising issues of sexual abuse. This alliance involved connecting experiences of abuse to the therapeutic concept of

trauma (Illouz, 2008: 167). Feminists pointed out that people could be damaged psychically, not just physically, and that damage from traumatic events may exert effects years after the events themselves. They emphasised, further, how trauma greatly threatens self-development and a healthy psyche, to which all citizens have the same rights. Feminist activists deployed therapeutic knowledge so as to transform private trauma of abuse into a public issue (*ibid.*: 168–169).

One central method launched by the feminist movement in the 1960s was collective work carried out in feminist consciousness-raising (CR) groups. As Dana Becker (2005: 8) has demonstrated, CR enabled women's collective reflection on their gendered experience in both personal and political terms. The self and private experiences were taken as a starting point for politicisation and for seeking common ground among women of all stripes (*ibid.*: 136). The idea for CR was of women coming together in order to reach a feminist consciousness – that is, recognise the connection between their ostensibly personal problems and social structures – and, as their consciousness grew, becoming politically activated to promote social change by bringing those 'personal' problems to the public's awareness. The feminist slogan 'personal is political' encapsulates this idea of politics running through all levels from personal to political.

Numerous scholars have claimed that what ultimately transpired was quite different: therapeutic practices applied in CR ended up merely privatising social problems. Dana Cloud (1998), for example, has suggested that the CR groups, in fact, shied away from confrontation with systemic power by withdrawing to the realm of their 'therapeutic enclaves'. According to Cloud, an additional problem with CR was that it mainly attracted middle- and upper-class women, who tended not to be focused on the profound social change envisioned by radical feminists. Feminist politics has been accused also of falling back to identity politics, as it had no apparent push for moving beyond the personal (Becker, 2005: 136–137). Conversely, it has been argued that feminists of that time showed success in launching a new personal way of conducting politics (Illouz, 2008: 170). This brave approach gradually encouraged other groups to share painful feelings publicly instead of holding them back (Stein, 2011: 192) and opened a discursive political space of action for those who had previously been marginalised and lacked a public voice (*ibid.*: 189).

While Western feminists were politicising the personal in CR in the 1960s and the 1970s, feminism in the Soviet Union was heavily suppressed. Nonetheless, 1979 did see a dissident feminist group publish an underground paper (*Almanac: Women of Russia*) dealing with abortion, the miserable conditions of Soviet maternity hospitals, and the challenges of single parenting, although the group was soon brought under the surveillance of the State Security Committee (KGB) and some of its members were ultimately deported from the country in the early 1980s (Iukina, 2007: 456–457). As did feminism, the 'psy' disciplines occupied a relatively marginal position in Soviet society and were not popular among the masses. Instead, biomedical, physiological, and pedagogical discourses were employed to make sense of the self, emphasising correct Communist socialisation. (Matza 2010, quoted in Salmenniemi & Adamson, 2015: 90–91.)

It was with the breakdown of the Soviet system that both feminist thought and psychological knowledge started to spread in Russia. Motivated by foreign grants and funders eager to support the country's democratic development, its feminist groups began politicising the 'private' with the aid of CR (see e.g. Sperling, 1999). However, the expanding women's movement and various women's organisations were situated mostly within the academic realm and remained accessible primarily to the middle classes and elite (Salmenniemi, 2014).

Also, various forms of popular psychology were being disseminated in the 1990s via television, self-help books, and meeting groups (Honey, 2014; Lerner, 2015; Salmenniemi & Vorona, 2014). The number of therapy professionals grew rapidly, accordingly (Matza, 2009). However, the intervening years have not made them affordable for many: private psychological services are provided and consumed mostly by the middle classes and the elite (Matza, 2012). While psychology itself, especially in its popular form, has maintained its appeal among the masses, feminism was rather supplanted, with anti-feminist sentiments coming to dominate in the early 2000s. Postfeminist ideas were domesticated in Russia with self-help books directed to female audiences (Salmenniemi & Adamson, 2015) highlighting not so much the collective as the individual-oriented sides of feminine agency, intimately tied to neoliberal ideas of personal-level responsibility and self-governance (see also Gill, 2007).

With this chapter I suggest that the generation of feminist activity that has emerged in the 2010s is producing a public trauma culture. Via this concept, introduced by Ann Cvetkovich (2003), the walls often erected between therapeutic and political are brought down (see also Salmenniemi et al. and Yankellevich in this book). Here, I will follow Cvetkovich's lead in analysing trauma as a social and cultural discourse (rather than clinical) that emerges in response to struggling with the psychic consequences of historical events and 'cultural memory'. With this analysis, I explore the feminist activism produced around trauma to uncover how psychic injury and painful memories are assembled to form therapeutic politics.

The context, material, and methods

The feminist activists interviewed for this study connect their feminist politicisation with increasingly conservative state politics conducted by the Russian government in tandem with the Russian Orthodox Church. The launch of the conservative politics can be traced back to around 2005, when the government started to impose increasing regulation of sexual and reproductive rights (see for example Temkina & Zdravomyslova, 2014). It reached its climax between 2011 and 2013, when both women and non-heterosexuals encountered political limitations through limits placed on access to abortion and banning of public 'propaganda' on non-heterosexuality for minors. Russia's conservative turn has been traced to attempts to address the country's declining birth rate, which has been framed as a 'demographic crisis' (Rivkin-Fish, 2010). While similar tendencies of conservative governance exist elsewhere, there are peculiarities to the Russian conservatism. For example, embracing conservative ideology combined with a

strong national sentiment has been assessed as a strategy to win back Russia's lost international status and to position the country as morally superior to an overly emancipated and liberal West that trumpets the value of human rights (Wilkinson, 2014; Stella & Nartova, 2016). The ideological distance the Russian government has built in relation to Western countries is evidenced in recently enacted laws abolishing non-governmental organisations' right to receive foreign funding, while those that do are declared foreign agents. However, this is only one example of government-level attempts to police civic activism deemed not in line with its politics. Since 2005, freedom of assembly in public places has been limited, and in the wake of the mass anti-government protests of 2011–2013, officials have been equipped with a new set of tools for limiting public use of space and demonstrating (see, for example, Gabowitsch, 2017).

Meanwhile, the promotion of conservative moral values in day-to-day life is rhetorically centred on the concept of a 'traditional family' based on heteronormative gender relations that are portrayed as natural. For example, decriminalisation of some forms of domestic violence in 2017 was introduced to 'protect the traditional family'. One of the key ideological figures in this traditional setting, positioned alongside the devoted mother, is the 'real man' (*muzhik*) who is able to protect both his family and, when necessary, the nation. Elena Gapova (2016: 36) shows how a man who cannot fulfil his duty as the head of the household and provide for his family (i.e., be a 'real man') tends to be stripped of his masculinity and honour in this configuration. Gapova goes on to point out the close link between the Russian ideal 'real man' figure and national ideas of power, militarism, violence, and the army (ibid.: 63–65), as strong men are supposed to be a manifestation of a strong and virile country. The ideological campaign surrounding masculinity, also referred to as neomasculinism, presents new obstacles to feminist activism in the 2010s (Johnson & Saarinen, 2013: 550).

This chapter draws on research material produced through four months of fieldwork in St Petersburg and Moscow, primarily in 2015. Regular follow-up visits were also conducted between 2016 and 2018 in order to visit feminist events. The ethnographically produced material consists of 42 interviews with self-identified feminists and with individuals who identified otherwise but were active on the fringes of the movement. The fieldwork for this research included both participatory and non-participatory observation during feminist events, unofficial meetings, demonstrations, self-defense classes, and theatre rehearsals. Alongside participant observation, my work has been informed by Internet observation as I analyse some key social media feminist actions. This is because social media serves as a central stage for contemporary feminist activism.

Most of the interlocutors identified as women, although there were some who identified as men or genderqueer. In addition, roughly half of my informants identified as non-heterosexual (LGBTQ). The key activists who will accompany us through this chapter are anarchofeminist Anna, radical feminist Katia, queerfeminist Sonia, and queerfeminist Zhenia.⁴ Most of them discussed trauma and violence in relation to their activism, at length, in the interviews. Only Zhenia was an exception, not discussing gendered violence or trauma but, rather, contributing to

the idea of feminism as a shelter for certain kinds of vulnerable subjects. Trauma is thus an emic concept deployed by the activists themselves, with the exception of Zhenia. However, among the numerous individuals interviewed for this study there were also many who avoided discussing violence or noted that it had become too big an issue within the movement. With this article, I choose to concentrate instead on the significant proportion of the activists who focused on gendered violence and/or discussed their trauma.

For example, anarchofeminist Anna mentioned not being able to ignore the theme of violence in practice even if she was already fed up with it: 'Even if you do not really want to discuss violence but do something, all the same you end up talking about violence in the end. And that is why feminism is so important in Russia: because it gives people statements about violence'.

Further, I suggest that the contemporary Russian political context invites certain radical expressions of feminism 'onstage'. In this I refer both to radical feminism and to radical forms of action. The former, which focuses on a binary gender order and often views gendered violence as a 'keystone of women's oppression' in patriarchy (MacKay, 2015), takes strikingly visible forms in Russia today. Radical forms of action, in turn, are visible in Russian feminism in its vocal disagreement with the current regime and its politics.

For Katia, who was in her late twenties, radicality in activism took on many dimensions. As she identified as a radical feminist, her activism was focused chiefly on fighting gendered violence and male supremacy over women. However, since Katia took part in confrontational street actions, radicality manifested itself in her public actions too. Katia emphasised that she was not an 'elite' feminist but a feminist politicising the situation of those she saw as holding the most vulnerable position in the society: lower-class women with limited resources. For her, feminism was thereby an issue of class. This is Katia's narration of becoming a feminist:

I was in a new relationship. And as I still suffered from an unhappy past relationship, I started searching for psychological articles on the Internet in order to solve my problems. And it so happened that I found an [feminist] article about abuse... I started reading it, further and further, and it turns out that Katia had become a feminist!

Katia was not the only one to associate feminism intimately with psychology. In fact, I soon noticed that psychology was something the activists were often as keen for as feminism itself in their strivings to deal with painful past experiences and to initiate change in their life. Many of the feminist events I attended included sessions that drew on psychology, with titles such as 'Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Psychological Trauma'. I soon noticed that these sessions were often the most well-attended events held at feminist gatherings. As I will show in the analysis, the therapeutic dimension to feminism encompassed much more than merely listening to lectures on psychology for aid in tackling difficult life situations. That said, before I delve into the activist narratives about the

feminist ‘shelter’ and therapeutic politics, I want to highlight that the therapeutic functions feminism served should be considered in context with the fact that activists such as Katia rarely had access to psychotherapeutic services or other social support structures.

Producing a mental shelter for the traumatised

Remarkably many of the activists I spoke to had a personal story to share about violence and abuse. Katia was not alone in this, and her experience was that women often came to feminism expressly because of such experiences: ‘Those women who have it all good rarely become feminists’, she sighed. Some activists described having faced violence while growing up, whereas others described later violence, whether in intimate relationships or in encounters with strangers. Many of the activists also mentioned popular videos spread via the Russian-speaking Internet that present gendered or sexual violence against young women without criticising this phenomenon – serving rather as a platform for young men showing off. During my fieldwork, a teenage girl was killed in a violent attack by a group of teenage boys, and various peaceful demonstrations were organised in her memory and to call attention to the issue of gendered violence.

For queerfeminist Sonia, the experience of feminist awakening was associated not only with a culture of endemic violence but also specifically with trauma:

I, like many people in this society, had a very traumatising experience of family in childhood. My father was violent, and our family very authoritarian. This was followed by a traumatic experience as a woman. [...] with a lot of things, people, violence. Though I think almost all the women I know share my experience.

Attaching one’s experience to the concept of trauma was common practice for many of the activists: the concept of trauma was employed as a collective tool for narrating past injuries and experiences, many first-hand but others indirect. For instance, anarchofeminist Anna labelled her trauma as a ‘moral’ injury when recounting an encounter with a stranger who had nearly raped her but whom she had dissuaded by giving him money:

Well, I am alive and was not strongly traumatised in a physical way, rather morally. And, of course, I told everyone about it: this is what happened to me. Because it was very triggering for me – but I can talk about it, and I believe it is important. All the women I told about it, and even all the men to whom I mentioned it, then started reminiscing about how their friends had experienced something similar... It was somewhat symptomatic.

Anna highlighted that her trauma stemmed from a constant threat of violence and referred to it as ‘symptomatic’ of cultural ills. This echoes how Cvetkovich (2003: 18) defines trauma in the context of trauma cultures. Even if the traumas

the activists narrated were different in nature, the narratives were tied together by the way the activists discussed the trauma: they did so from a collective point of view, thus building collective identity and a sense of we-ness by recalling similar kinds of threatening or violent moments in their life. Ron Eyerman (2001: 5–6), who associates memory closely with cultural trauma, has stated that a group is solidified and becomes aware of itself through reflection of a shared memory. The past becomes collectively experienced and interpreted – it is construed as a reference point for upcoming action (*ibid.*: 7).

I suggest that the feminists in Russia, by narrating their traumatic experiences, constructed a mental shelter to shield themselves from the ‘culture of violence’ even if only momentarily. The term ‘shelter’, in its dictionary definition, denotes a safe place or a refuge. When one feels the need for a shelter, this is because one feels vulnerable to something outside the shelter. While the metaphor is connected with a physical space of safety, that space in the context of feminist activism in Russia remains without physical walls or a roof. Indeed, feminist groups seldom had a permanent place to hold their meetings. For these activists, who were constantly on the move and on the lookout for available spaces, even only a metaphorical space of their own to which they could withdraw conveyed a relative feeling of comfort. At the same time, though, the ‘shelter’ notion also very concretely refers to physical havens for people who have faced gendered violence. The notion of feminism as a shelter thereby resonates with the fact that there is a great shortage of physical shelters for victims of gendered violence in Russia. With the decline of foreign funding for feminist initiatives in Russia in the first years of the 2000s, most NGO-run shelters were closed down. Today, it is mainly state-led public crisis centres that can afford physical shelter spaces (Johnson & Saarinen, 2013: 555–556). Accordingly, those shelters still available focus on a more conventional notion of violence (*ibid.*: 561) and are most likely not sensitive to non-normativity and feminist issues.

The narratives of finding one’s path to feminism were often also narratives of non-normative gender and sexual identity cast as deviant by the conservative political discourse. Zhenia, a genderqueer feminist, discussed feeling like an outsider everywhere. Reflecting further on this outsider identification, Zhenia connected it with personal gender and the toughening public atmosphere that followed on the heels of the ‘homopropaganda’ law and other conservative laws limiting activists’ space. While describing a complicated relationship to even the feminist community, this personal narrative at the same time seemed to identify feminists as the only community Zhenia could somewhat relate to. This was crystallised during a discussion of the police having inspected a local feminist event: while not having been there during the incident, Zhenia lamented: ‘How could they invade my space?’ In Zhenia’s narrative, feminism featured as the community and collective coming closest to the idea of belonging, something like a home for Zhenia. The metaphor of home that Zhenia hinted at resembles, in many ways, the idea of a shelter. As Saara Jäntti (2012: 81) has pointed out, safety is a notion often associated with the home, since a home is a place that is expected to provide a shelter from the world outside. At the same time, a

vast body of feminist scholarship illustrates how the reality for a significant proportion of the population is not actually safe, because of domestic violence (ibid.: 83). The idea of belonging that was articulated by Zhenia suggests that feminism offers an alternative space of belonging for those who feel at home and safe neither in the realm of the heterosexual normative family nor in a national community that depicts them as deviant outsiders and even as a threat to national unity.

I suggest that feminism has offered those coming together in its ‘shelter’ a resource and a refuge for momentarily detaching themselves from sticky concepts such as binary gender, most often bound up with conservative definitions of womanhood and heterosexuality. In the research material, various narratives of feminist becomings highlighted a strikingly narrow understanding of womanhood on the part of the surrounding society and its conservative context. The ‘shelter’ metaphor reflects an idea of the feminist collective as a space of withdrawal from that context, a space in which activists can take a ‘time out’, together healing their traumas and spending time with like-minded people who are not hostile towards feminist ideas and non-normativity.

Although feminism clearly took on shelter-like functions, it was connected also to ideas of publicly speaking out and making the trauma and ‘culture of violence’ visible. Indeed, the idea of the feminist shelter could, alongside other concepts, be discussed in dialogue with the notion of the political underground, with resonance as the place for political dissidence in the politically repressive Soviet era (see, for example, Zdravomyslova, 2011). It can be interpreted accordingly as a momentary collective refuge for those whose political demands are silenced in national politics but also as a platform from which public resistance arises.

Performing the trauma in public: being an active and responsible feminist

It has been argued in feminist research that a focus on gendered violence tends to victimise feminists and deprive them of agency by rendering them as passive objects (see, for example, Cloud, 1998; Gilson, 2016; see also Freigang in this book). However, the feminist activism I observed, even when it stemmed from traumatic memories, was connected to a new publicly active subjectivity. This was notwithstanding the fact that many of the activists did not believe they would be able to bring about social change any time soon as they felt the political situation to be too suppressive. Sonia, for example, took part in activist missions by night to highlight the problematics of gendered violence. Her group would choose a public place, take provocative pictures commenting on the thematics of violence, and publish them online the next day in hopes that the shocking stunt would attract wide attention on the Internet.

As was typical for many of the activists, Sonia discussed her activism as a moral obligation that she could not evade, even if – because she always ran the risk of being caught by the police – she did not particularly enjoy the actions themselves.

At the same time, though, Sonia discussed her public activism in tandem with dealing with her personal trauma:

I tried to defeat my traumatic experience, sought help from books and articles. And little by little I understood... I decided to do anything [I could] to ensure that there is less of this in the society. I decided to do all that I can, so that fewer girls would have an experience similar to mine.

Sonia thus highlighted that, while aiming to aid others and ultimately help initiate social change, she also received something herself in the process. This points towards the therapeutic dimensions of public action.

Anna added her own brushstrokes to the picture. Discussing the feminist virtue of being active in relation to the growing political apathy in Russia, she pointed out that fewer and fewer activists were ready to take to the streets after the crack-downs and mass detentions following the anti-government protests of 2012. She explained that, in continuing to take part in feminist public performances and events, she now was acting ‘on autopilot’ in trying to do at least something in order not to surrender to political apathy. Here, feminist active subjectivity was contrasted against a passive subjectivity figuratively looming constantly behind one’s back. It was also portrayed in opposition to passive acceptance of a conservative lifestyle with its normative ideas of gender and family, which she suggested that most people were leading. One had to be active so as not to surrender to passivity (i.e., the conservative, conventional life). The way Anna discussed being active not only paints a vivid picture of narrowing political prospects for all political opposition in Russia but depicts those prospects as being especially narrow for non-male activists. In the case of both Pussy Riot and the Ukrainian feminist group Femen, the group’s protest was depoliticised in the government responses, with attention being paid to their gender and ‘improper’ public behaviour rather than to the issues they had sought to highlight, such as homophobic policies, despotism, and problematics of prostitution (Bernstein, 2013; Thomas & Stehling, 2016). In this context, Sonia and Anna appeared to be publicly ‘making noise’ to resist constant silencing and their political subjectivity being denied. It seemed profoundly therapeutic to be publicly active rather than surrender to apathy as others had.

One popular mode of feminist action involves theatre and other performance. An action that made waves online called ‘The Road to the Temple’ is an interesting example of feminists fighting the conservative imperatives of passivity and the ‘culture of violence’ via public performance. Pictures from the action were published in February 2016 to coincide with Defender of the Fatherland Day, which celebrates war heroes and, indirectly, all Russian men. About a dozen activists conducted the performative action, on the steps of a local cathedral. Accordingly, photographs published online portray two men dragging ‘battered’ and bruised-looking female activists up the stairs to the church. As to why feminist actions in Russia often draw in such ways from theatrical strategies such as performance, one of the many reasons is simply that ‘culture’ is still less regulated than open

political action. However, these kinds of performances appeared fundamental to feminist politics also from a therapeutic standpoint: theatre provides a venue for articulating traumatic experiences without pathologising the performers; instead, their trauma is transformed into a resource (Cvetkovich, 2003). In dealing with the trauma by performing it, the activists can be interpreted as looking for dignified active agency rather than surrendering to passivity or the ‘illness’ often connected with trauma. Further, my observations indicate that feminist theatre, whether performed on the streets/Internet as in the above-mentioned case or in a theatre hall, was a way to deal with the traumatic memories in a delicate way for activists and audiences alike. Firstly, the mechanism of acting enabled them to create distance from possibly first-hand experiences of violence. The performances had an obvious therapeutic impact on their audiences too, with the ensuing emotions being vividly sensed during plays that dealt with gendered violence – for instance, as members of the audience quietly sobbed in the dark. It was striking how strongly emotions of sorrow could be sensed ‘in the air’ during performances yet were seldom discussed at feminist meetings and other gatherings (see Kolehmainen in this book). Performances thus manifested themselves as a form of dealing with the uncomfortable emotions connected with the traumas, and as a collective forum for healing.

Whereas emotions were performed rather than discussed, being responsible was dealt with at length in many of the interviews. Activists highlighted the community’s task of attracting new individuals and teaching them to take responsibility – that is, to actively organise feminist public actions themselves and spread the feminist word in society. The more people take up the responsibility, the more publicly visible feminist issues such as gendered violence can become. At the same time, however, many of the activists emphasised the movement’s shortage of individuals able to carry responsibility. Attention thus was turned from the social to the individual, with questions raised as to whether individual activists were responsible and moral enough to actually take part in feminist public action. Some activists even suggested that the ‘not-responsible ones’ simply had not yet dealt with their trauma.

Indeed, responsibility is a core therapeutic concept and has often been discussed in the neoliberal context as problematic (McRobbie, 2009; Salmenniemi & Adamson, 2015) in that it ultimately tends to burden individuals with an exhausting amount of responsibility for issues that can be resolved only socially. As Cloud (1998) points out, the pattern of discourse translating social and political problems into the language of individuals’ responsibility is a powerful persuasive force: it positions the individual as both the locus of the problem and responsible for bringing change. This is emphatically problematic in the context of a trauma culture, for it easily turns into blaming the victims and causing them to suffer more instead of looking for social solutions. Just such a tendency to lay the blame at the victims’ feet has been found to exist also at Russia’s public crisis centres, where the discourse frequently casts women as responsible for resolving the domestic violence they themselves have suffered or are at risk of (Jäppinen, 2015: 262). While I do not want to question the importance of taking responsibility in the

context of activism, I wish to point out how much more complex the issue of responsibility is when traumas of violence are involved simultaneously. The feminist virtue of ‘bearing individual responsibility’ that I often encountered in the interviews appeared to flirt at times with the postfeminist ethos domesticated in Russian society alongside neoliberal capitalism (Salmenniemi & Adamson, 2015). As Salmenniemi and Adamson (*ibid.*: 90) have pointed out, this neoliberal self-monitoring produces social hierarchies rather than eliminating them – in the feminist case, it suggests that those who have already suffered should, in addition, carry the responsibility rather than turn to collective efforts for social resolutions or demand that the perpetrators shoulder their responsibility. This pattern was visible during my fieldwork too. However, some of the feminists focusing on violence in their activism openly rejected a push for individual-level responsibility and shifted their gaze towards the perpetrators and structures.

A more recent feminist online action comments on both the trauma culture and who is to ultimately carry the responsibility: timed for 2017’s Defender of the Fatherland Day, it could be viewed as a public invitation for young men to come share the trauma of violence with the women. Instead of themselves performing, female activists had invited a group of male allies to protest with them. Pictures later published on a feminist social media page showed these activist men at a local war memorial with bare backs turned to the camera. Across their backs was a message painted as if with blood: ‘Happy Day of the Fatherland!’ – highlighting the precarious position of young men, who are assigned the role of national ‘protectors’ and may be forced to join the army and go to war. I posit that this action is a manifestation of how the trauma culture is evolving and negotiated among the various activists who are weary of the increasingly militant and conservative national politics. The focus thereby was shifted publicly from women to men, with the latter being portrayed as themselves vulnerable and in need of protection. They do not have to be ‘real men’, always ready to protect others and, if necessary, the nation. This action, I suggest, brought gendered violence into the discussion not only at the level of private day-to-day life but also as something on the level of structures. In fact, it mounted a critique of the state system’s machinery that produces one generation after another of defenders. Whereas 2016’s Road to the Temple action could be seen as addressing the responsibility of the Russian Orthodox Church, because it took place on the steps of a cathedral, the more recent action could be read as a direct commentary on the state’s culpability in maintaining violent structures with the aid of normative and stiff gender roles.

Conclusions: feminist activism as therapeutic politics

With this chapter, I have focused on how feminists in Russia produce a culture around their traumatic experiences. I have discovered the shelter metaphor to illuminate how individuals arrive at feminism in their efforts to combat traumas caused by experiences of gendered violence and a sense of being unsafe and outsiders. As a response to those emotions, the trauma narratives are further used as a way to build collective identity and belonging. Analysing feminism as a shelter

cast into relief its dual role: I illustrated how it is produced as a mental safe space for people who feel out of place and unprotected in society at large (especially under conservative politics that stress the importance of ‘traditional’ values and family over human rights and safety). At the same time the shelter, far from being symbolic of pure withdrawal, exists also as a platform from which feminist activists have a footing to publicly combat a ‘culture of violence’ that concentrates on producing generations of defenders rather than acknowledging gendered violence as a social problem.

The trauma culture thus evolves into a wider critique of violence on all levels of Russian society, exhorting the state to carry its responsibility. This culture is both private and public, and, while it mostly brings together people who identify as women and others who do not accept the label ‘male’, the ‘Happy Day of the Fatherland!’ action in 2017 demonstrates a door gradually opening here for young men too. Their trauma arising from Russia’s militant politics and the associated narrowly defined male roles is now at least partially acknowledged as a pivotal element of the trauma culture.

Tracing the feminist trauma culture has enabled me to sketch out an assemblage of feminist therapeutic politics also, addressed in terms of feminist ideals of being active and responsible as well as feminist performances as a forum for both therapeutic and political endeavours. In the activists’ narratives, the therapeutic facet to the feminist virtue of being active was visible not only in relation to combating violence but also in incorporating the therapeutic idea of being publicly active despite the trauma. Along similar lines, the feminist performances presented particular stages for both politicising the issue of violence and engaging in collective therapy for cultural trauma. I suggest that both feminist action in general and the performances in particular take on therapeutic dimensions because they allow the activists to hold on to their agency despite the trauma and the increasingly repressive politics.

One key aspect of therapeutic politics is that of balancing between personal and social responsibility in the context of trauma and a ‘culture of violence’, with the thorny matter of negotiation: who holds responsibility at the end of the day? The aspect of responsibility brings me back to the radical dimensions of feminism that I suggest are key to therapeutic politics in this context. As this chapter has illustrated, feminist activism often has roots in profoundly personal experiences of violence and outsiderhood. I find that in a context of vast inequality in distribution of resources, it is, in fact, highly radical – and most likely therapeutic – to decline to engage with neoliberal concepts of individual-level responsibility with its associated tendency to overlook collective and societal responsibility.

The dimension of class plays a pivotal role here. Feminist radical action and identifying as a radical feminist are both connected to classed positions to some extent, as we saw in Katia’s case. I suggest that the flame for both radical feminism and carrying it into action is far more likely to be lit in people with less to lose – here, women, with weaker access to resources (such as platforms for disseminating critical knowledge and money for professional counselling) and generally at greater risk of gendered violence. It is no wonder, then, that this

classed activism takes strikingly radical forms in its public action and performance. After all, it often springs forth from embodied and traumatic first-hand experiences.

To conclude, feminist therapeutic politics should be read as a critique of the failure of official politics to acknowledge non-male political subjects. In addition, it should be interpreted as an indictment to the lack of support structures for those in need of shelter and safety in contemporary Russian society.

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Notes

- 1 Russia had its own #MeToo, a year earlier: In 2016, a similar campaign of publishing gendered experiences of violence and harassment emerged in the Russian-speaking countries and their social media after a Ukrainian feminist published her story of gendered violence for the first time. The name of this campaign (#ianeboiusskazat) meant 'I am not afraid to speak'.
- 2 The feminists interviewed for this study varied in their attitudes towards Pussy Riot, with some of the activists not considering Pussy Riot a feminist group and criticising their actions while others expressed respect for their bravery and support for those actions.
- 3 In 2011, Russia adopted a law that limits abortions, though rejecting some of the toughest restrictions backed by the Russian Orthodox Church. The new law limits abortions to the first 12 weeks of pregnancy, with certain exceptions, and requires a waiting period of two to seven days for abortions. The law on gay 'propaganda' was enacted on the federal level in 2013, following similar laws at regional level and bans on 'propagating LGBTIQ issues for minors'.
- 4 All names used in this chapter are pseudonyms. Radical feminism refers to a feminism that views women and men as distinct political classes (MacKay, 2015) whereas queer-feminism and anarchofeminism rather dismantle the binary understanding of gender as well as aim to challenge numerous norms such as heteronormativity. However, like Finn MacKay notes, 'definitions of any type of feminism are fraught with difficulty' (ibid.). They are defined in different and at times even in contradicting ways also by the activists interviewed for this study.

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