

**“The Russian Mayfia: Examining the Thieves World
from Thieves-In Law to Thieves in Authority”**

by

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Abstract:

Russian Organized Crime consists of many groups. It is not a monolithic structure. The Thieves Law rules the actions of the “vory v. zakon” or Thief-In-Law. This article will examine the origins, current criminal operations and possible future threats posed by Russian Organized Crime, The thieves’ world, and particularly the vory, that created and maintained the bonds and climate of trust necessary for carrying out organized crime transnationally.

Russian Organized Crime (ROC)

There have always been criminals in Russia. Chalidze (1977) found that:

“In previous centuries the Russian word *vor*, which now means ‘thief’ was a generic term for a criminal or foreign enemy. *Tat* was the word for thief” (p.4).

The Russian usage of *vor* as meaning “thief” and being a public criminal outcast is documented by Baldev, Vasilev and Sidov (2014) when they stated that:

“The branding of criminals, practiced in Russia since ancient times, can be considered another prototype of the modern criminal tattoo. Up until 1846, criminals condemned to hard labor were branded *VOR* (THiEF). The letters on the cheeks and forehead allowed any law abiding citizen to recognize a convict, even

after they had served their term. Brands were often applied to shoulder blades and the right forearm. These were of three types; the letters *SK*: *SsylnoKatorzhny* (hard labour convict); *SP*: *SsylnoPoselenets* (hard labour deportee); and *B*: *Begly* (escapee). The letters were tattooed using metal needles attached to a special device which made deep wounds, these were then covered with dye. Escapees were branded on their forearms. If they were repeat offenders, a new brand was applied below the previous one. In 1846, when the Decree on Punishments came into effect, the brand *VOR* was replaced with *KAT*, the first three letters of the word for hard labour convict—*katorzhnik*. The letter *K* was applied to the right cheek, *A* to the forehead, and *T* to the left cheek. Since that date, the word *kat* has come to mean a scoundrel for whom nothing is sacred. The decree remained in effect up until 1863. These lifelong marks on the body and face of hard labour convicts can be considered the earliest symbols of membership in the world of outcasts: the first criminal tattoos. Though forcibly applied, they never the less began to function as caste markings. “(p.21)

The pervasiveness of theft in Russia was demonstrated when Chalidze (1977) observed that Tsar Nicholas I was reported by a Russian newspaper that during the Crimean War (1853-1856) to have told his son: “I believe you and I are the only people in Russia who don’t steal” (p.28) Although there have always been criminals in Russia, the Russian mafia developed as a prison gang during Soviet times and thus adopted a unique criminal culture. Developing in the Soviet Gulag system Russian organized crime adopted a patriarchal and hierarchical organizational structure. Unlike prison gangs in the United States which developed along ethnic and racial lines, prison gangs in the former Soviet Union developed their own unique cultural view of their “thieves’ world” in spite of the wide diversity of indigenous populations in the former USSR. According to Finckenauer and Voronin (2001) :

“Ethnicity did not play the significant role in Soviet organized crime that it played in the United States. Instead, the Soviet prison system, in many ways, fulfilled the functions that were satisfied by shared ethnicity in the United States. In the Soviet Union, a professional criminal class developed in Soviet prisons during the Stalinist period that began in 1924—the era of the gulag. These criminals adopted behaviors, rules, values and sanctions that bound them together in what was called the thieves world, led by the elite “vory v zakone”, criminals who lived according to the ‘thieves’ law’. This thieves’ world, and particularly the vory, created and maintained the bonds and climate of trust necessary for carrying out organized crime.”

Starting as a prison gang, the Russian Mafia is very fond of tattoos. Like the Japanese Yakzua, many, if not most members of the Russian Mafia have tattoos. The tattoos are an expression of the member’s acceptance and adherence to the code of the thieves world (

Baldaev, Vasiliev and Plutser-Sarno, 2006, p.35). The tattoos can show the offense committed, number of times incarcerated, or the length of incarceration. Nicknames and affiliations with their Clan or group may also be present. The Canadian Customs Service developed an excellent guide to Russian Mafia tattoos (Radanko, 2011, p.271; Baldaev, Vasiliev, Plutser-Sarno, 2009; Lambert, 2003, p.4; Finckenauer and Waring, 1998, p.102-103; Chalidze, 1977, p.66-67). In addition to the numerous tattoos, the *vor* often spoke a language of their own called *fenya* (Varese, 2001, p.146).

According to Finckenauer and Waring (1998) the Vor society that developed in the Soviet prisons adopted a Thieves Code that forbade cooperation in any way with the state and included:

- * The *vor* is forbidden to work and must live only by criminal activity.
- * The *vor* is expected to turn his back on his birth family and to have no family of his own except for the criminal community that is his family.
- * The *vor* must give moral and material assistance to other thieves.
- * The *vor* must recruit and teach his craft to the young.
- * The *vor* must limit his drinking and gambling. Becoming drunk or being unable to pay gambling debts is prohibited.
- * The *vor* must not become involved with the authorities, participate in social activities, or join social organizations.
- * The *vor* must not take up weapons on behalf of the authorities or serve in the military.
- * The *vor* must abide by and carry out punishments determined by the thieves' meeting (a combination dispute resolution and court forum)
- * The *vor* must fulfill all promises made to other thieves." (p. 105)

The prohibition of the Thieves Code against aiding the authorities and taking up weapons for them was absolute (Chalidze, 1977, p.49). Friedman (2000) observed that even during World War II when the motherland was threatened by Nazi invaders, the *vor* were expected to honor the Thieves Code. Friedman found that:

“During the Second World War, Stalin devised a plot to annihilate the thriving *vor* subculture by recruiting them to defend the motherland. Those who fought with the Red Army, defying the age-old prohibition of helping the State, were rewarded by being arrested after the war and thrown into the same prison camps with the *vors* who had refused to join the epic conflict. The ‘collaborators’ were branded *suki*, or bitches. At night, when the Arctic concentration camps grew miserably cold, knives were unsheathed, and the two sides hacked each other to pieces, barracks were bombed and set on fire. The ‘Vor Wars’, lasted from 1945 to 1953. When they were over, only the *vors* who refused to battle the Nazis had survived. By then,

they wielded ultimate authority in prison, even over wardens, importing liquor, narcotics, and women. “(p.10)

Another type of thief that occupies the Thieves World are the “Thieves in Authority” or *avtoritety*. These are employees and associates of the government that steal from the state or misappropriate state property, services or funds to their own benefit. These *avoritety* where not exactly *nomenklatura* (senior government officials) or even *apparatchiks* (party functionaries) they served the government and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union as directors, managers and supervisors in the vast Soviet empire while looting the government for their own benefit (Finckenauer and Waring, 1998, p. 92-93). The *avtoritety* often act in concert with or in full cooperation with the *vory v zakone* in conduct of their criminal enterprises. In noting the illegal diversion of consumer goods from the official state economy in the Soviet Union, Serio (2008) found that by the late 1960’s:

“The traditional criminal world generally began to interact more frequently with the upperworld, as the so-called shadow economy operators (*teniviki*) and the workshop managers (*tsekhoviki*) were pulling in massive amounts of money by providing the balck market with products that should have been going into the state distribution network. They needed protection from the government, from their competition, and from criminals. They sought it through bribing state officials but also by entering into agreements with protectors in the criminal world.” (p.145)

Most of the crime committed by Russian Mafia clans during Soviet times involved economic crimes within the state system. These crimes often included: misappropriation of government goods and services, black market activities to obtain Western goods, drug trafficking, bootleg liquor, untaxed cigarettes and Illegal (for profit) carpentry, plumbing, electrical work (Finckenauer and Waring, 2001; Albani, et.al. ,1995).

The fall of Communism (1989-1991) was a time of rapid change in the former Soviet Union. The strictly regulated economy and governmental structure of the USSR was replaced by unregulated type of capitalism that has been described by many as “Wild West” in nature. The breakaway of many of the former Soviet republics into separate nation states only accelerated this. Russian organized crime seized on these opportunities as a chance to expand and evolve (Frickenhauser and Voronin, 2001; Waller and Yasman, 1995). Shelley (1998) observed that:

“In 1994 Russia’s then interior minister, Mikhail Yegorov, said the number of organized crime groups in the former Soviet Union had grown from 785 during Gorbachev’s reign to 5,691.

By 1996 this estimate had grown to 8,000 groups, each with memberships of between 50 and 1,000. The government in Moscow estimates the Russian mafia

controls 40% of private business and 60% of state-owned companies. Unofficial sources say 80% of Russian banks are controlled either directly or indirectly by criminals.“

According to Serio (2008), the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent reorganization of the Russian government provided an atmosphere that Russian organized crime was able to expand and flourish. This in turn led to conflict within the Russian organized crime groups for control and resulted in the Great Mob War of 1992-1994. This was in turn followed by the collapse of the Ruble in 1998 which sent many Russian organized crime groups looking for other opportunities in their foreign holdings. All of these factors contributed to the rapid rise of the Russian Mafia and their transnational approach to criminality (p.206-207).

The Great Mob War of 1992-1994 and The Continued Violence of the Russian Mafia

Competition among the various Russian Mafia clans led to violence and the rise of flamboyant mob bosses. As they became more organized, the Russian Mafia groups claimed territory and sought dominance in their illegal trades. Varese (2001) observed that:

“The ability to mobilize a number of well-armed individuals is a crucial requirement for survival in the underworld. Since the early 1990’s, the post-Soviet criminal landscape started to be populated by territorially based groups with this ability.”

The Great Mob War of 1992-1994 was an attempt by various Russian Organized Crime Groups and the organized crime groups of some of the former Soviet Republics to dominate the criminal community in the former Soviet Union. Klebnikov (2000) found that:

“The ‘Great Mob War’ was fought mostly in Moscow, but its echo was heard as far as Vladivostok, Krasnoyarsk, Sverdlovsk (Yekaterinburg), Samara, St. Petersburg, Tbilisi, Grozny, London, and New York. The root of the conflict was economic. Dozens of top gangster bosses had come out of prison after Communism fell, and they found the nation’s prime economic assets up for grabs. Huge industrial companies, mines, and oil fields were being privatized. Anyone ruthless enough could attain unimaginable wealth almost overnight. One popular analogy of what was happening in Russia at this time was that of a car wreck—a vehicle stuffed with dollar bills crashes, the money is scattered on the ground, and the bystanders push one another away, trying to grab the biggest bundle. Both the older mob bosses (the thieves-professing-the-code) and the younger ‘gangster businessmen’ engaged in a savage struggle with one another to stake their claim.” (p.21)

Klebnikov (2000) observed that although the mob war was chaotic, the factions soon divided into two primary alliances. The Chechen and the thieves-professing-the-code formed one faction. The other faction included the Solntsevo Brotherhood or Solntsevskaya brigade (Varesse, 2001, p.170) and their allies, Ivankov operating from New York, Otarik, and Sergei Timofeyev (AKA Sylvester, because of his alleged resemblance to the American movie star Sylvester Stallone). This group was often called the Slavic Alliance and was considered to be very anti-Chechen (p.21-25).

Otari Kvantrishvili aka Otarik (1948-1994) had been a wrestler and was involved with the Dynamo Sports Club. Kvantrishvili had been charged with rape in 1966 and sent to a psychiatric hospital (Serio, 2008, p.186; Klebnikov, 2000,p.18). Kvantrishvili used his involvement with the Dynamo Sports Club as a front for his racketeering activities (Varese, 2001, p.68). He was known as someone who could act as a mediator between warring Russian Mafia factions. Otarik was a good friend and associate of Ivankov (Serio, 2008, p.145). Otarik was murdered by a sniper in 1994 while leaving a bathhouse (Varese, 2001, p.228).

Sergei Timofeyev aka Sylvester was the leader of the Orekhovskaya gang (Serio, 2008,p.198; Varese, 2001, p. 170). Timofeyev was involved in several gang murders and had operations in Cyprus. He was murdered in 1994 when a car bomb exploded (Varese, 2001, p.170; Friedman,2000, p.125-126). His gang, the Orekhovskaya , began to fight among themselves and later merged with the Solntsevskaya Bratva. Schreck (2005) reported that:

“Orekhovskaya, which rose to prominence for racketeering in the early 1990s, is thought to have organized the slayings of at least 35 people, including an investigator, a senior police official and many rival gangsters. The group’s influence all but vanished after a series of arrests in the late 1990s.”

Boris Berzovsky (1946-2013) was a Russian businessmen who made his fortune during the turbulent transition between the Soviet Union and modern Russia. Klebnikov (2000) reported that:

“In 1992, according to Moscow police sources, Berzovsky approached Mikhas to buy the Orbita, a Solntsevo-controlled super-market on Smolensk Square, next to the Foreign Ministry building; he wanted this prestigious site for one of his car dealerships. The price Mikhas demanded was supposedly \$1 million; Berzovsky apparently found the price too high. Whether on the advice of his partner, Badri, or on his own initiative, Berzovsky ultimately teamed up with the enemies of the Solntsevo Brotherhood: the Chechens. Meanwhile, Berzovsky’s rivals in the auto

market, beholden to other organized-crime groups, were jealous of his success. They resented his inside deal with Russia's largest auto company, Autovaz, and his successful lobbying of the Ministry of Foreign Trade to impose high customs duties on imported automobiles. Thus Berezovsky found himself in the middle of a war between Moscow's predominant gangster families." (p.20-21)

In 1993, Berezovsky traveled to Israel and obtained Israeli citizenship, but retained his Russian citizenship (Klebnikov, 2000, p. 23). In 1994, Berezovsky survived a car bombing attack on his life in Moscow (Klebnikov, 2000, p. 38). Later, due to his political connections and ownership of a Russian television station (ORT) he became involved with Russian President Boris Yeltsin serving in the Duma (Russian Parliament) (Varese, 2001, p.33). Berezovsky's wealth rose to an estimated \$3 billion dollars. His business tactics fell under suspicion because of his ties with organized crime. Analysts at GlobalSecurity.Org (2015) reported that:

"Berezovsky's business policies and actions were continuously scrutinized, however, and have often been considered corrupt. Those within the business community questioned how the oligarch's enterprises continuously floundered while Berezovsky's wealth increased considerably. Numerous investigations were launched against Berezovsky and his companies and corporations. The authorities uncovered numerous instances of embezzlement, fraud, and tax-evasion, but were incapable of prosecuting Berezovsky because of his political power and influence.

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Berezovsky's fortunes began to fade as Yeltsin left office and was replaced by Vladimir Putin. The Putin government began an anti-oligarch campaign. GlobalSecurity.Org (2015) stated that:

"Putin denounced oligarchs and described their negative impacts on domestic and economic affairs in his State of the Nation Address in July 2000. In the same speech the President made comments that many argued had indirectly implicated Berezovsky. Later that year, the state's prosecution office launched a series of inquiries and reopened its investigations against Berezovsky and his business operations. The oligarch did not enjoy the level of political protection he had in the past. Amidst growing pressure and the possibility of criminal charges, Berezovsky fled Russia in November 2000 into self-imposed exile, and was granted asylum in Britain. In 2001 Berezovsky was officially charged with fraud and political corruption, but requests for his extradition by Moscow were rejected."

Berezovsky was convicted in absentia of fraud and embezzlement in a Russian court. The British government refused to extradite him back to Russia. Berezovsky became a very

vocal critic of Putin. Although in 2012, Berezonsky personally became involved in a series of lawsuits in British courts over some of his Russian business holdings and over issues of libel. In 2013, Berezonsky was found hanging in his London home. The coroner's verdict in 2014 was left open and made no decision on whether his death was suicide or murder. Reporting on Berezonsky's death, GlobalSecurity.Org (2015) stated that:

“Bernd Brinkmann, a renowned German expert on asphyxiation, who was hired by the tycoon's family said that the tycoon was strangled, and then hung on a bathroom rail in an imitation of suicide. ‘There is no way for a death by hanging to have occurred,’ said Brinkmann, who claimed the shape of Berezovsky's injuries and the discoloration of his face when he was found suggested a violent death.”

Since the Great Mob War of 1992-1994, the violence among Russian organized crime groups continued, but on a smaller scale. Shelley (1998) found that:

“Russia sees around 10,000 fatal shootings a year, 600 of which are contract killings. In the last five years 95 bankers have been murdered. Assassins, who often kill for as little as £600 (\$1,000), have targeted hotel bosses, restaurateurs, sports figures, businessmen, politicians, journalists and Afghan war veterans. In Soviet times the KGB kept the lid on the Russian mafia but its successor, the FSB, is underfunded and demoralized.”

The Russian law enforcement authorities are still engaged in their attempt to stem the violence and frequent conduct raids on Russian mafia leaders and gatherings. (Livesey, 2015)

Solntsevskaya Bratva aka Solntsevo brigade

The Solntsevskaya Bratva is the largest of the Russian Organized Crime groups. Matthews (2014) reported that:

“The group is composed of 10 separate quasi-autonomous ‘brigades’ that operate more or less independently of each other. The group does pool its resources, however, and the money is overseen by a 12-person council that “meets regularly in different parts of the world, often disguising their meetings as festive occasions.”

“It's estimated that the group claims upwards of 9,000 members, and that it's bread and butter is the drug trade and human trafficking. Russian organized crime in general is heavily involved in the heroin trade that originates in Afghanistan: It is estimated that Russia consumes about 12% of the world's heroin, while it contains just 0.5% of the world's population.”

Matthews also estimated the group's income at over 8.5 billion annually (Matthews, 2014). Varese (2001) described the Solntsevo as an umbrella organization that was made up of different crews that were active in several different countries (p. 171). Porter (2015) claims that the Solntsevskaya Bravtva has ties with the Russian FSB and that:

“The group's tentacles are now believed to extend as far as Indonesia and Latin America, where they have established cocaine trafficking networks in collusion with Mexican cartels.”

The Russian Mafia and Crime

A free market economy in the new Russia also led to the expansion of the types of crime the Russian Mafia was engaged in. Russian Organized Crime quickly adapted to the fluid economic conditions and the newly found access to foreign trade and travel. Finckenaue and Waring (1998) observed that the primary crimes of the Russian Mafia now were: Drug Trafficking, Weapons Trafficking, Human Trafficking, Sex Trafficking, Pornography, Black Market Goods, Antiquities Trafficking, Stolen Cars, Precious Metals and Money Laundering (, p. 118) The Russian Mafia is also extensively involved in the trafficking of untaxed cigarettes and counterfeit tax stamps throughout Europe (Billingslea, 2004).

Drug trafficking is an area that the Russian Mafia excels. The Russian Mafia is not only engaged in sale and transport, but in production of drugs as well. A specialty is Krokodil or desomorphine. Albini, et.al. (1995) observed that:

“It is in the realm of drug-trafficking, where much of the high profit is made...the Russian former republics produce 25 times more hashish than the rest of the world and opium poppies flourish in abundance in Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and other territories of the former U.S.S.R.”

The changes in the Russian economy brought on by the fall of communism benefited Russian Organized Crime greatly. Lindberg, et.al. (1997) in observing the extent and the effect the Russian Organized Crime had on the overall Russian economy observed that:

“It is estimated that between 80% and 90% of all businesses pay some sort of street tax to organized crime groups, many up to one-third of their profits. Organized crime groups, in turn, pay one-third of their income to bribe public officials. Incredibly, much of the money generated through the sale of formerly state-owned capital and resources is funneled abroad into the private bank accounts of government officials and organized crime members at the rate of \$ 1 billion per month, draining the Russian economy of much needed cash. Money that stays home is laundered through investment in legitimate enterprises, blurring the line between

legitimate business and criminal enterprises. Consequently, a significant portion, over 50%, of the legitimate economy is controlled by organized crime, including 35,000 Russian businesses and 60% of banks, according to the Interior Ministry. It is also reported that the majority of privatized real estate in Moscow is now under the influence of criminal groups.” (p. 92-93)

As the criminal operations of the *Vor* infiltrated the Russian Banking system. Bank fraud and illegal money laundering quickly became staples of the criminal activities of ROC. Emanuel E. Zeltser (Director and General Counsel of the American Russian Law Institute) testified before the House Committee on Banking and Financial Services on September 29, 1999. His testimony dealt with the Hearing on the Bank of New York, Russian organized crime and money laundering. Zeltser testified that the collapsed Russian Inkombank had been controlled by members of the Russian Mafia. Zeltser (1999) testified that:

“According to Inkombank’s own promotional material this mob-controlled bank had correspondent relationships with top banks in the United States, Canada, Switzerland and many other Western countries. Its representative offices and branches were licensed in Switzerland, UK, Germany and Cyprus. Illicit proceeds could flow to any point in the world at the touch of a button in Moscow. In May of 1996, the US Security and Exchange Commission approved a \$10 M Inkombank/ Bank of New York joint securities issue, known as ADR. The American public was given the opportunity to buy an equity stake in the world’s most profitable enterprise, Russian Organized Crime.”

Many of these Russian Mob bosses modeled themselves after the flamboyant life styles that they saw in American movies about American gangsters from the *La Costa Nostra* in the 1920’s and 1930’s. The surrounded themselves with very visible signs of wealth such as expensive cars, clothing, etc. and adopted a very visible public “Tough Guy” persona. As noted by Shelly (1998) this led to violence. So like their American Mafia counterparts of the 1920’s and 1930’s, Russian mob bosses began to favor elaborate public funerals. Members of other mobs often attend or send notes or elaborate floral arrangements. Elaborate, large and laser engraved tombstones are favored by the narcissistic tastes of the Russian mob bosses.

Krysha “The Roof”

In describing the organization and tactics of Russian Organized Crime the Center for Strategic & International Studies [CSIS] (1997) used the Russian term , Krysha and observed that:

“One of the most prominent terms of the new Russian criminal jargon is krysha,

which literally means “roof.” Throughout the Cold War, Soviet intelligence services used this term to refer to a cover set up for intelligence of officers in a foreign country. In the context of ROC, however, krysha is now used to refer to an umbrella of protection, or “bandit roof.” This protection can come in the form of a criminal overlord protecting members of his organization. It also can come in the form of a criminal group’s declaring that a specific business is paying it extortion money and is therefore under its protection. Finally, a krysha also can include certain forms of corrupt government protection, including the militsiya, tax police, the military, customs, and border guards.”

The Great Russian Immigrations

The immigrations of Russians into other countries came in several waves. Many Russians immigrated during Tsarist times (1890-1920) for better opportunities or to escape perceived religious oppression. After the 1917 revolution and the civil war that followed, there was a wave of immigration to escape the takeover of Communism as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics replaced the previous Tsarist Russian Empire. Although restrictions in the United States immigration laws such as the Johnson Act of 1921 and the Reed-Johnson Act of 1924 greatly restricted immigration from Eastern Europe to the United States (Finckenhauer & Waring, 1998, p. 40).

As the Soviet Union began to have political troubles and eventually dissolved there were two more main waves of Russian immigration. Finckenhauer & Waring (1998) found that:

“By the late 1970’s, for example, the cause of the ‘refuseniks’—Jews who applied for permission to emigrate from the Soviet Union but were not permitted to do so—had become a major cause and a political issue in the United States. Russian Jews eventually were allowed almost unlimited immigration because of the discriminatory treatment they received in the Soviet Union, and other Russians were likewise permitted to emigrate from the USSR to the United States as political refugees.” (p.40)

This new wave of immigration from the Soviet Union beginning in 1968, turned into an exodus as hundreds of thousands fled the USSR and Communism. Rosner (1986) found that the wave of Russian immigrants were educated and often had technological job skills unlike the immigrants of earlier waves of immigration (p. 125). Siegel and Bovenkerk (2000) observed that:

“Emigration from the former Soviet Union and the creation of an expatriate Red Mafia provide a magnificent opportunity to study the process of ethnic organized crime. The immigration itself constitutes a recent and ongoing movement of people,

many of whom have not decided to settle. The two main waves of immigration from the former Soviet Union took place between 1968 and 1983 (with several breaks) and in the period since 1988, when Gorbachev introduced his reforms. Including the right of free movement. The most important Russian-speaking communities were established in the United States, Israel, Germany, Canada, and South Africa. Although the majority of the immigrants were Jews, there were also Germans, Ukrainians, and Armenians. “ (p. 428)

ROC in the United States

After and during the first wave of Russian immigration into the United States (1890-1920), Russian immigrants who chose to participate in organized crime often did so in partnership or association with members of established LCN mafia families in their areas. This collaboration between Jewish Russian immigrants and local Italian criminals was first noted in a controversial *North American Review* article by NYPD police Commissioner, Theodore A. Bingham as early as 1908. Bingham (1908) observed that:

“The crimes committed by the Russian Hebrews are generally those against property. They are burglars, firebugs, pickpockets and highway robbers—when they have the courage; but, though all crime is their province, pocket-picking is the one to which they seem to take most naturally. Indeed, pickpockets of other nationalities are beginning to recognize the superiority of the Russian Hebrew in that gentle art, and there have been several instances lately where a Hebrew and an Italian had formed a combination for theft in the streets, the former being always selected for the “tool,” as the professionals term that one who does the actual reaching into the victim’s pocket, while the others create a diversion to distract attention, or start a fight in case of the detection and pursuit of the thief. “ (p. 384)

While Bingham was police commissioner of New York City from (1906-1909) he may have obtained some of his views on immigrants and crime for the previous New York City Police Commissioner William MaAdoo who was police commissioner from 1904-1905 and had a very negative, almost anti-Semitic view of the Russian Jewish immigrants and their perceived criminality (Finckenhauser & Waring, 1998,p.48).

Radanko (2011) found that many Russian immigrants that came during the first wave of Russian immigration were Russian Jews from provinces in Russia, Ukraine and what is now Poland. They were fleeing religious persecution. Those Russian immigrants that participated in some type of organized crime began to do so during prohibition and in league with various LCN families. Mobsters like David Berman aka Davie the Jew (1903-1957) worked with the Genovesse family in Minneapolis and latter Las Vegas in booze and gambling rackets (Radanko, 2011, p.289-290; Fischer, 2007, p.13). Others like Isadore

Blumenfeld aka Kid Cann aka Issy (1900-1981) operated in Minnesota and partnered with Chicago's Al Capone to run illegal liquor. He also engaged in narcotics trafficking and prostitution. Cann was also the associate of another Russian Jewish immigrant, Meyer Lansky (Radanko, 2011, p. 293). Yet another Russian-Jewish gangster of the period was Charles "King" Solomon (1884-1933) who was one of the largest bootleggers in Boston. It was rumored, but never proven, that he ran illegal liquor with Joseph Kennedy during this period. Solomon also ran narcotics, prostitution and gambling. Solomon cooperated with the LCN families and the Irish mob. He was a powerful enough gangster that he attended the 1927 Atlantic City Crime conference arranged by Meyer Lansky. Solomon was murdered in a Boston night club called the Cotton Club in 1933. Although dying, Solomon refused to name the four gangsters to the police that shot him and took that knowledge with him to the grave (Radanko, 2011, p. 301-305).

Evsei "Little Don" Agron came to the United States in 1975 as a part of the wave of Soviet Jews that were allowed to leave the USSR during the 1970's. A vory v zakone, who had served time in the Soviet Gulag's for murder, he set up his criminal operations in the Brighton Beach area of Brooklyn, New York (Freidman, 2000, p. 23-42). Agron was allied with the Genovese Family of LCN. He was murdered in New York City in 1985.

Marat Balagula came to the United States in 1977 as a refugee and settled in Brighton Beach, NY. He began to operate a nightclub there that he used as a front for his criminal activities. Balagula worked for Agron. and served as his consigliere. He is suspected of ordering Argon's death, but it was never proven (Friedman, 2000, p. 41-42). Balagua allied himself with the Genovese Family of LCN. Balagula was heavily involved in gasoline tax fraud and credit card fraud. He was also involved in diamond smuggling operation from Sierra Leone in Africa and a heroin smuggling operation from Thailand. In 1986, he was arrested and convicted in federal court in a United States Secret Service case on credit fraud and gasoline tax fraud charges. Although he fled to Belgium and latter Germany, in 1989 he was captured, extradited back to the United States and sent to federal prison (Friedman, 2000, p. 42-67). Balagula was released from federal prison in 2004.

Boris Nayfeld came to the United States from Gomel, Russia in the 1970's as a religious refugee and settled in Brighton Beach, NY (Friedman, 2000, p. 25-26; Radanko, 2011, p. 232). Nayfeld became the chauffeur of the local Russian Mob leader, Evsei Agron (Freidman, 2000, p. 38). After Agron was murdered in 1985, Nayfeld became Balagula's chauffeur. Nayfeld latter took over the Bratva gang after Balagula's arrest. . Nayfeld was involved in extensive heroin trafficking into the New York area from Thailand. Nayfeld was involved in a violent struggle for control of criminal enterprises in New York with other Russian organized crime figures such as Monya Elston (Radanko, 2011, p.233-236; Freidman, 2000, p. 3-21). In January, 1994, he was arrested by federal agents for drug trafficking. Later, he and his co-defendants, the Dozortsev brothers, pleaded guilty to

laundering the drug money which belonged to themselves and Ricardo Fanchini (Finckenauer & Waring, 1998, p.157, p.246-247). Siegel (2003a) stated that:

“Boris Nayfeld (‘Beeba’, or ‘Daddy’), the former boxer settled in Edegem, a suburb of Antwerp, after he escaped an attempt on his life. He had contacts in Berlin in connection with the Chechen Mafia. In Belgium he has built a strong network, including drugs smuggling on a large scale.” (p.55)

In increase of Russian Organized Crime came to the United States with the fall of the Soviet Union and the mass migration of Russian immigrant into the United States after 1991. Noting the rise of the Russian Mafia in the United States, Finckenauer (2015) observed that:

“It is estimated that approximately 15 of these loosely categorized criminal groups are operating in the United States, and that 8 or 9 of them maintain links to Russia. The estimated membership of those groups is 5 - 6,000 members. To put these estimates into context, a recent report published by the Global Organized Crime Project of Washington’s Center for Strategic and International Studies (“Russian Organized Crime: Putin’s Challenge”) estimates that 200 large ROC groups are currently operating in 58 countries worldwide, including the United States.”

The New York State Organized Crime Task Force (NYSOCTF, et.al., 1996) report on Russian Émigré Crime noted American law enforcement was hampered in in the investigation of Russian organized crime by the distrust of the governmental authorities by Russian immigrants and stated that:

“Moreover, opportunities to obtain information from Russian emigres are further hampered by the lack of Russian speaking police officers. Most law enforcement agents investigating Russian–émigré crime do not speak Russian and are unfamiliar with the peculiarities of the language, such as the use of the Cyrillic alphabet, the feminization of surnames, and the inversion of birthdates. This often results in inaccurate recording of biographic data. In addition, interviews of Russians who are suspects, witnesses, or victims of crime often require the use of translators with varying skill levels. Information obtained from these persons, which might otherwise provide insight into the workings of Russian–émigré criminal enterprises, is therefore, often limited or obscured.

Furthermore, Russian emigres tend to be highly educated. Those who engage in crime are very resourceful and sophisticated in their methods of operation. They often carry false identification documents or use variations of the spelling of their names to conceal past criminal histories and/or facilitate present criminal conduct. These tactics, coupled with a transitory lifestyle, make identification and

apprehension of Russian-émigré criminals an arduous task.” (p.180)

The Russian Mafia is very flexible in the crimes that it promotes to make money. The Russian Mafia’s primary crimes in the United States include: Auto Theft [Cars were smuggled back into Russia] (Albini, et.al., 1995), Auto Chop Shops, Drug Trafficking, Extortion, Fraud, Fuel tax evasion, Gambling, Insurance Fraud, Staged Automobile Accidents, Confidence Schemes, Credit Card Fraud, Check Frauds, Identity Theft, Document Forgery (passports, etc.), Pornography, Sex Trafficking, Human Trafficking, and Weapons Trafficking (Finckenauer & Waring, 1998)

Vyacheslav Kirillovich Ivankov aka Yaponchick

For a time, Ivankov was one of the most notorious Russian Mafia criminals and operated in the United States and Russia. Vyacheslav Kirillovich Ivankov was born in Tbilisi, Georgia, USSR on January 2, 1940. Ivankov was commonly known as Yaponchick which means “little Japanese”. Some say it was because of his slightly oriental facial features (Radanko, 2011, p.60). Others have implied that that he took the name after Moisey Volfovich Vinnitskiy aka Mishka Yaponchik (1891-1919) a famous Russian outlaw that fought on the Soviet side during the Russian Revolution and Civil War.

Ivankov first went to prison in the USSR for a bar fight. Upon his release he continued his criminal career selling goods on the black market and burglarizing houses (Radanko, 2011, p.61). Imprisoned once more, he was named Vor V Zakone in 1974 while in Butyrka Prison in the USSR (Klebnikov, 2000, p.17). Ivankov was arrested again in 1982 for weapons violations, forgery and drug trafficking. He was released 1991 (Lunde, 2004, Durden-Smith, 1995).

In his 1996 testimony before the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations of the Committee on Governmental Affairs before the United States Senate, Russia’s Deputy Minister of Interior Igor Nikolayevich Kozhevnikov testified that he believed that Ivankov fled to the United States to avoid further arrest in Russia (Radanko, 2011, p. 62). Ivankov immigrated to the United States in 1992 on a business visa. He claimed that he was planning to work in the movie industry (Finckenhauser & Waring, 1998,p.110).

Examining Ivankov’s travels, Durden-Smith (1995) reported that:

“Sometime in 1992, he disappeared from Moscow and then reappeared in Los Angeles, where he was said to have become the Russian mob’s link to the Columbian cartels. After that, he seems to have shifted his base of operations to New York and to have moved regularly between the Big Apple, Vienna and Dusseldorf. He’s also said to have had a number of meetings with Russian organized-crime figures in

various cities in the United States and Canada. The move to New York would have made sense. For in 1985, the godfather of Brighton Beach, Evsei Agron, had been killed outside his Brooklyn apartment. And his successor, Marat Balagula, known as The Georgian or The Giant -- the man who had brought the American-based Organizatsiya to maturity through a series of jewelry heists, insurance frauds, and an enormous gasoline bootlegging and tax scam -- had been arrested in Frankfurt in 1989. Two years later, outside Moscow, there was a big meeting of 100 of the Russian thieves-in-law to discuss how to operate in the new circumstances prevailing after the August coup. It's believed to have started the movement of the Russian mafias into bank operations, bank scams and money laundering. And it would have made sense to have set a strategy there -- ultimately using Yaponchik -- to bring the New York Organizatsiya back into line. This would have made even greater sense after the death of the last important traditional thief-in-law Rafik Svo, in June 1993. After that, the impulse would have been to go international -- as the Moscow group seems to have done in meetings with leaders of organized crime from other countries -- notably Italy."

Ivankov was a member of the Solntsevskaya Bratva and was their representative in the United States (Radanko, 2011, p.61; Varese, 2001, p. 170; Serio, 2008, p 69-70). He supported that group in the Great Mob War of 1992-1994 from his position New York (Klebnikov, 2000, p. 11-43). Ivankov was rumored to have ties with the KGB (Klebnikov, 2000, p.75). Pravda's Sinelnikov (2011) reported that:

"Russian criminals are highly sophisticated and uncatchable for the West. As soon as the Soviet Union collapsed, Russian criminals started to look for new homes far away from the motherland. Vyacheslav Ivankov, for example, bought a ticket to the United States as soon as he came out of prison in Russia. That was a perfect opportunity for him to change his image. In Russia, he was known as a jailbird. In the States, he earned the reputation of Robin Hood; US newspapers referred to him as the new Solzhenitsyn. Afterwards, Mr. Ivankov showed the States how to love freedom. The deeds of Mr. Ivankov in particular and the Russian mafia in general are dramatized and demonized in the West. The Russian mafia definitely exists, but it does not stand out from others of the ilk, such as Cosa Nostra, Yakuza, Ndrangheta, etc. The myth that has been created is much more profitable. "

In the United States, Ivanov ruled a Russian criminal group that operated out of the Brighton Beach neighborhood of Brooklyn that had over 100 members. (CBS, 2000) Ivankov was allied with at least three of LCN's "Five Families" in the NYC area (Williams, 2000, p. 199-200). Ivankov was arrested on June 8, 1995 by the FBI (working with the MVD and the

RCMP) for extortion and conspiracy (FBI, 2015d; Serio, 2008; 172; Raab, 1995). Ivankov was convicted along with several others and sentenced to prison [U.S. vs. V.K. Ivankov, 146 F.3d 73 (2nd Cir. 1998)].

After he served his time in federal prison in the United States, Ivankov was deported back to Russia on July 13, 2004 to face charges that he was involved in the 1992 double murder of two Turkish nationals. Ivankov was acquitted by a Russian court in 2005 of the murder charges. Radanko (2011) observed that the trial only lasted one day and “The witnesses, a police officer among them, claimed to have never seen him in their lives” (P.61). Ivankov was shot by a sniper on July 28, 2009 while leaving a Moscow restaurant. He died of his injuries on October 9, 2009. Ivankov’s funeral was a grand mob affair and was attended by hundreds of Russian mobsters (Schwartz, 2009; Radanko, 2011, p.62).

Semion Mogilevich

According to Varese (2001), during the mid-1990’s Semion Mogilevich acted as the Solntsevo’s representative in Hungary (p.170). During this time period, Mogilevich was also very active in the United States and Canada. Radanko (2011) observed that many European and United States federal law enforcement authorities believed that Mogilevich was the “Boss of Bosses” of the Russian Mafia worldwide. He had nicknames of “Don Semyon” and “The Brainy Don”. (p.10) According to the FBI (2015e):

“Simon Mogilevich is wanted for his alleged participation in a multi-million dollar scheme to defraud thousands of investors in the stock of a public company incorporated in Canada, but headquartered in Newtown, Bucks County, Pennsylvania, between 1993 and 1998. The scheme to defraud collapsed in 1998, after thousands of investors lost in excess of 150 million U.S. Dollars, and Mogilevich, thought to have allegedly funded and authorized the scheme, was indicted in April of 2003.”

Mogilevich was indicted in United States Federal Court on charges by the United States Department of Justice for Fraud by Wire, RICO Conspiracy, Money Laundering Conspiracy, Money Laundering, Aiding and Abetting, Securities Fraud, Filing False Registration With the SEC, False Filings With the SEC and Falsification of Books and Records. He fled the country and was last reported hiding in Russia. In October of 2009 he was placed on the FBI’s Ten Most Wanted Fugitive list where he remains (FBI, 2015e).

In 1999, Semion Mogilevich also attempted to run for a seat in the Russian Duma (parliament) on the LDPR (Russian Liberal Democratic Party) ticket (Varese, 2001, p.183). Mogilevich was involved in drug trafficking. According to Freidman (2000) Mogilevich: “also fortified his organization by coordinating activities with non-Russian crime

groups such as the Japanese Yakuza and the Italian Camorra. “(p.242) Migilevich shielded his illegal activities by running a number of legitimate enterprises that supported his illegal businesses. For example: He purchased the controlling share in an arms manufacturing company in Hungary. Thus, he obtained a Hungarian licence to sell weapons as a legitimate armaments manufacturer. However, Mogilevich has been accused of also selling illegally acquired Warsaw Pact weapons (Freidman, 2000, p. 244-245).

ROC as a Transnational Gang: Belgium

Russian Organized Crime has expanded into a transnational criminal organization. Belgium is especially attractive to Russian Organized Crime because of its’ extensive diamond markets. Dunn (2000) remarked that:

“Antwerp’s port has a reputation for being a major smuggling base. The city’s diamond dealers, many of them Russian Jews, have links to many Russian Gangs and are allegedly among the world’s most experienced in the art of laundering money and dodging taxes.” (p.81)

Noting the transnational nature of Russian Organized Crime, Siegel (2003a) observed that:

“The transnational character of Russian organized crime can also be illustrated by the position of Belgium, and especially Antwerp, on the criminal map of the Russian Mafia. Russian Crime Bosses take refuge in Belgium when they are in danger somewhere else. Belgium has the reputation of an ideal location for Russian criminal networks. Drugs and women trafficking, money laundering and trade in stolen and counterfeit gold and diamonds are the main activities of Russian speaking criminals in Belgium. “(p.55)

ROC as a Transnational Gang: Columbia

Columbia is a major source of drugs. The Russian Mafia has formed alliances with Columbian drug cartels to facilitate drug trafficking operations. These alliances include the Russian mobsters providing technical assistance to the Columbian drug cartels in the development of new ways to transport drugs. As an example of this, LA Times reporter Darling (2000) states that:

“The three foreigners first raised suspicions in the Andean mountain village of Facatativa because they never smiled or waved. Then people noticed that they always had food delivered and seldom emerged from the warehouse where they worked.

Finally, someone called the police. Officers, shocked by what they discovered when they entered the warehouse during a predawn raid Sept. 7, made two phone

calls: one to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration office here and another to the Russian ambassador.

Thanks to the offended villagers, law enforcement officers had found a 100-foot submarine under construction, the first tangible evidence of a long-suspected alliance between the latest generation of Colombian drug traffickers and the Russian mafia.”

In describing the partnership between the Columbian cartels and ROC, CSIS (1997) found that:

“Cooperative efforts between ROC groups and the Colombian drug cartels are centered in Miami, where the local FBI of office characterized the Russian gangsters as “very brutal...they are very sophisticated. They are computer literate. They hit the ground running.” Miami represents a gateway to both the United States and Latin America. The Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) and FBI disrupted one scheme that involved a plan to use a Russian-built submarine to smuggle cocaine from Colombia to the United States. “

ROC as a Transnational Gang: Cyprus

Cyprus was attractive to Russian Organized Crime because of its banks and the favorable banking laws of the country. When you engage in illegal businesses you find yourself in need of somewhere to stash the cash that you have acquired. You want somewhere that the local government will not seize it and that the banking regulations are favorable to your needs. The Russian Mafia has found that the banking system in Cyprus fills the bill (Siegel, 2003a, p.60-61; Dunn, 2000, p.82; Fisk, 1994). This gives them somewhere to stash the cash and to launder the money. According to Webster (2015) Cyprus has become one of the major places for the Russian Mafia to launder money.

ROC as a Transnational Gang: Israel

As masses of Soviet Jews fled Russia, in the period from 1968-1983 and from 1988-onward, many immigrated to Israel (Siegel and Bovenkerk, 2000). The vast majority of those immigrants were not criminals, but some were. Siegel (2003a) noted that Israel was a favorite spot for many Russian Mafia to immigrate to because of Israel’s favorable immigration and banking laws. The members of Russian Organized Crime found that it is much easier to travel with an Israeli passport than a Russian one (p.52-55). According to Connolly (1998) “Former police chief Asaf Hefetz says £2.5bn (\$4bn) of organized crime money from the former Soviet Union has been invested in Israeli real estate, businesses and banks in the past seven years. “

One of these immigrant who was also a member of ROC was Grigory Lerner aka Gregory Lerner aka Tzi Ben-Ari. According to Connolly (1998) “Gregory Lerner, who was arrested in 1997 for defrauding four Russian banks of £70m (\$106m), was reputedly sent to Israel to head up one of the money laundering operations. “Lerner, 47, served six years in jail after reaching a plea bargain with Israeli prosecutors. However, after being released from prison, Lerner resumed his criminal life. Grayeff (2006) reports that:

“Gregory Lerner, who had already served six years in prison for fraud, has been arrested in Paraguay after fleeing from Israel two weeks ago following a second conviction for embezzlement, forgery and money-laundering, the police said on Monday. Investigators at the Serious and International Crimes Unit traced Lerner (Zvi Ben-Ari) to South America after receiving intelligence information. In cooperation with the Israel Police’s representative in the region, the local authorities tracked Lerner to a hotel in the Paraguayan capital, Asuncion. He is believed to have escaped from Israel under an assumed identity. According to Asuncion reports, Lerner was drunk when apprehended and had to be hauled off to hospital before being formally arrested. Cash and a forged passport were found in his hotel room.”

ROC as a Transnational Gang: Eastern Europe, The Balkans and Italy

Russian Organized Crime is one of the dominant criminal groups in central Europe, Eastern Europe and the Balkans (Plywaczewski, 2003, 63-72; Dunn, 2000, p. 82-84). Russian Organized Crime is also allied with some segments of Italian Organized Crime (Friedman, 2000, p. 242). The primary crimes of the Russian Mafia organizations in these areas include: Auto Theft, Drug Trafficking, Human Trafficking, Weapons Trafficking, and Art or Antiquities Smuggling or Theft.

ROC as a Transnational Gang: Germany

There is a large Russian-speaking population in Germany and many Russian Mafia dons like to do business there. The German newspaper, Die Welt (2009) reported that the Russian Mafia was active in Berlin and that many of the cars that were stolen in Germany ended up in Russia. Siegel (2003a) found that the Russian Mafia in Germany was engaged in: Weapons Trafficking (including nuclear materials), Human trafficking, Smuggling Art and Antiquities, Auto theft, Prostitution, and Money Laundering (p. 57-60).

ROC as a Transnational Gang: The Netherlands

Siegel and Bovenkerk (2000) estimated that approximately 10,000 Russian speaking immigrants moved into Belgium and the Netherlands. They observed that many of these

immigrants were Soviet Jews and have first immigrated to Israel before coming to Belgium and the Netherlands. They also observed that many of the immigrants arrived with forged documents (p.424). Siegel and Bovenkerk (2000) found that these immigrants suffered from a public perception that they were somehow involved with the Russian Mafia. While indeed some were, the vast majorities were not (p. 431).

However, the Netherlands is attractive to the members of Russian Organized crime because of their relaxed views on some drugs and prostitution. In the Netherlands The Russian Mafia in the Netherlands is involved in: Human Trafficking, Drug Trafficking, Weapons Trafficking, Auto theft, Art and Antiquities Theft or Smuggling and Money Laundering (Siegal and Bovenkerk, 2000, p. 433; Dunn, 2000, p.84).

ROC as a Prison Gang

The Russian Mafia began in the Soviet Gulag Prison system before coming out of prison and into the streets. But because they are still operating as a criminal organization it is logical to assume that if you commit crimes, sometimes you are going to get caught. The numbers of Russian Mafia members in prison in the United States is relatively small. However, in Europe (especially in Eastern Europe) it is much larger. Plywaczewski (2003) found that when there were significant numbers of Russian Mafia inmates in a prison they tended to become one of the most dominant prison gangs in the prison and intimidated the other prisoners into compliance or cooperation.

The Russian Mafia is a transnational criminal organization that spans over 50 countries. Beginning in the Soviet Gulags they have rapidly adapted to changing times. It is this flexibility and willingness to change that makes them a dangerous threat to law enforcement.

Summary

The Russian mafia began as a prison gang in the gulags of the Stalinist Soviet prison system. The *vor* has developed into a unique Russian criminal class with its own code of conduct. The Russian mafia in now a transnational criminal operation and poses a significant threat to international law enforcement.

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