Abstract. This research views the Russian Vory v Zakone, or “Thieves-in-Law,” and their world, Vorovskoi Mir. Through the historical lens, this research draws primarily on academic sources analyzing the birth of the vory in the GULag labor camps of the Soviet Union, the subsequent evolution of a tradition criminal subculture within and outside of the camps ruled by the vory, their spread throughout the former Soviet Union, and government efforts to pacify this criminal organization. By carefully viewing the “Thieves’ Code” as written by typical vor, their crimes, and the Russian government’s reactions, one can begin to understand the motivations of this criminal organization, their impact on the regions they inhabit, and how they remain in operation to date. As the thieves asserted dominance over the scattered prison camps of the Soviet Union they quickly learned to harness the corruptibility of the common man, from ordinary soldiers to influential politicians, implanting themselves within the political and economic systems of Russia and its satellite countries. This placed the vory in an invaluable position for control and survival, but also on a collision course with police agencies and other criminal organizations, creating an early war within the prisons themselves and then a national crime war. However, it will not be conflict between criminals and law enforcement, but rather the rise of a new generation of criminals that will determine the fate of Russia’s former kingpins.
**VOROVSKOI MIR: RUSSIA AND THE WORLD OF THE VORY V ZAKONE**

**Introduction**

*Vorovskoi Mir*, the “Thieves’ World,” loosely defines the criminal culture and organization that began to appear in the Soviet GULag prison system. By the 1980s the tattoos, slang, and folklore that constituted *vorovskoi mir* began to fade at the hands of a modern generation of Russian criminals, but its importance did not. Since the inception of the GULag system of prison labor camps in the late 1920s and throughout the 1930s, the hardened criminals, or “thieves,” played a major role in the justice system.† From bribing drunken camp guards to some of the world’s most influential politicians and businessmen, Russia’s criminals have certainly elevated themselves from mere prisoners with small hope of survival to kingpins of the modern world. However, does corruption truly ensure the survival of the *vory v zakone*? Even considering the Russian government’s rare attacks on high ranking criminals, the traditional *vor* has been all but phased out and replaced by the modern generation, a generation that does not share the traditions, or, most importantly, profess the code of their predecessors. The strict laws of the thieves’ code shaped *vorovskoi mir* as a primary pillar for not only the organization itself, but also a model for crime, the handling of government and other criminals, and the very journey from a common criminal to a *vor*, the highest patriarch of Russian crime at the height of their power. This shift away from tradition certainly has and will continue to affect the criminal underworld in Russia, and it will be the crucial factor for many criminals’ self-destruction or dominance in the evolving world of business and technology.‖

**History**

**Imperial Beginnings**

Despite a deep history of thievery and banditry, crime in the Russian Empire was far from organized. For much of Russia’s early history these types of crime were mostly secluded to the countryside due to the virtual absence of any police force. Even after the reforms set in place by Tsar Nicholas I, who sought to not only quell his enemies by the use of his secret police as Ivan the Terrible had done but to also grip the lawlessness of Russia, the situation in the countryside did not change substantially. The number of police, of all ranks and positions, increased but was still incredibly disproportionate: 47,866 lawmen for a nation of 127,000,000 citizens by the turn of the nineteenth century. In combination, these forces were inefficient, neglected, and extremely corrupt. Bandits became legends immortalized through works such as Matvey Komarlov’s *The Tale of Vanka Kain*, inspired by the crimes of the infamous eighteenth century bandit.2

This romantic expression of crime morphs many bandits and thieves into dashing and powerful figures that are seen more as defenders or avengers than criminals. Though not

---

† “*Vorovskoi Mir*” is Russian for the “thieves’ world,” and indicates the Russian criminal underworld. The term finds its origins in the 20th century slums of Russia’s industrial and urban centers and came to encompass the criminal culture that became prominent in the Gulag camps.


2 Ibid., 86-93.
necessarily the beginning of a criminal culture, this marks the emergence of a criminal folklore that inspired, rather than discouraged, one from engaging in a criminal lifestyle. Crime followed urbanization, expanding greatly in the overcrowded slums housing desperate workers and peasants in search of a new life in Russian cities, as is usually the case of early industrialization.\textsuperscript{3} It is within these industrial sectors that vorovskoi mir emerged: from the proletarian children that so eagerly played “thief,” to the professional shchipachy and skokari commonly roaming the streets, thievery was widespread and romanticized as an honorable means of survival.\textsuperscript{4}

\textit{The Gulag}

In the aftermath of the collapse of the Provisional Government, which had replaced the imperial regime, the Bolsheviks seized and gripped a rather fragile hold on the country. The majority of the upmost elite of the thieves perished or emigrated in the upheaval. As Soviet society materialized in the 1920s and 1930s, so did the Gulag system, implemented as part of Stalin’s economic policies as a way to generate and accelerate industrialization.\textsuperscript{5} It was in the fierce northern labor camps that the vory v zakone rose to power and dominated Russian organized crime until the 1950s as vory began to struggle with an evolving system after Stalin’s death.\textsuperscript{5} Within the Gulag, the thieves-in-law were hated by ordinary criminals and political prisoners alike. The thieves were often unleashed to control and intimidate the other prisoners, in fact from 1937 to the end of the Second World War high ranking thieves did not work at all in the labor camps, but rather ensured that the other prisoners did.\textsuperscript{6} The vory effectively controlled day to day camp life from basic communications with a language all their own to work enforcement, knocking out plenty of teeth along the way.\textsuperscript{7} The complex and self-regulating society of the thieves lasted well after the war and the Gulag itself, but a combination of outside and internal pressures weakened their monopoly on crime in Russia.\textsuperscript{8}

\textit{The “Thieves’ World”}

\textbf{Honor Among Thieves}

The laws of the vory v zakone developed in late tsarist Russia, long preceding the Gulag. Harsh punishments followed those who broke the simple, but strictly enforced, rules of the thieves. Not only did the rules dictate the policies and lives of thieves, but by the late twentieth

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{3} Ibid., 93-102.
\textsuperscript{4} Ibid., 102-103.
\textsuperscript{†} GULag is an acronym for Glavnoye upravleniye ispravitelno-trudovykh lagerery i kolonii i.e. “The Chief Directorate (Administration) of Correct Labor Camps and Colonies,” but the word Gulag itself has come to symbolize the entire prison camp system.
\textsuperscript{†} “Vory v Zakone” is Russian for “thieves-in-law,” however, the “law” that is being referred to is the thieves’ own set of laws, known as the “Thieves’ Code”.
\textsuperscript{†} The exact set of rules can vary from source to source, for the most common set of rules) see J. Anderson Black, “The Russian Mafiya.” In Organized Crime, ed. Charlie Fuller (Broomall, PA: Mason Crest Publishers, 2003), 53.
century all members of the Russian *mafiya* superstructure, which was more of a cluster of small crime organizations encompassing members from every position of power, rather than a large complex singular organization, had to submit to the code.\(^9\)\(^\text{†}\) Rejecting all relatives, never holding legitimate employment, and refusing to cooperate with the authorities under any circumstances are some of the most influential of the thieves’ laws.\(^10\) The last of these mentioned laws led to the first large-scale organized resistance against the *vory* in the prisons. This resistance developed into a full-scale conflict within the camps, on one side was the thieves and on the other stood the so-called *suki* and the camp administrators.\(^\text{†}\) The result was a catastrophic split between the thieves by the 1970s: the older generation who had stood unwavering to their oaths under the code split with a new generation that rejected tradition. The code and the *vory* themselves experienced a revival in the 1980s, but there was already a large section of young criminals unwilling to follow their former patriarchs, dismantling the crime monopoly.\(^11\)

*The Language of Criminals*

Criminal slang and tattoos are widely considered the hallmarks of the *vorovskoi mir*. Even the younger generation clung closely to these two types of languages used by the *vory* until recent years. The slang of the Russian criminal underworld is derived so heavily from every different language spoke in the multiethnic Russian Empire (and later Soviet Union) that it cannot be understood by even fluent Russian speakers. Despite several attempts to eradicate the slang in the soviet prisons by camp administrators the language never went away was commonly the language of all of the inmates and, occasionally, the language of camp guards and officials.\(^12\) However, tattoos were much more distinguishable as the language of power and status among the thieves. Bodily ink physically separated a *vor* from the typical criminal, with simple tattoos describing their rank in the criminal hierarchy to complex artistic tattoos describing the crimes performed and punishments endured.\(^13\)

Tattoos in *vorovskoi mir* typically indicate several key traits of any given criminal: rank in the criminal underworld, the types of crime committed by that individual, as well as prison sentences (i.e. years and location served). The most common and meaningful tattoos are generally located on the body and hands. Body tattoos often represent rank and general traits: epaulettes tattooed on the shoulders signify a criminal lieutenant and a bull or devil symbolizes a criminal that performs executions for the *vory* (see Fig. 1). Hand tattoos often symbolize prison sentences, prison experience, and the types of crime committed by that particular criminal: “MIR” shows resistance against the prison system, a ring with an “A” denotes an anarchist, a ring with a skull marked with an “X” shape behind signifies a conviction for brigandage, and crosses on the knuckles indicate how many prison sentences have been served (see Fig. 2).\(^\text{†}\)\(^14\)


\(^\text{†}\) *Suki* is Russian for “bitches” and refers to criminals that cooperated with the authorities, challenging the *vory*’s dominance of the camps. The resulting conflict is often referred to as the “Bitch Wars.”


\(^12\) Applebaum, *Gulag*, 285-287.

\(^13\) Ibid., 287-288.

\(^\text{†}\) “MIR” is an acronym for “Menya Ispravit Rasstrel,” Russian for “execution will reform me,” a slogan in direct defiance of the Gulag ideal of prisoner rehabilitation, reeducation, or reform.

Crime and Punishment

The vory v zakone are often characterized as a mercenary criminal type of organization due to the use of violence and intimidation to ensure their power.¹⁵ Murders, bombings, kidnappings, and gunbattles overwhelmed Russian cities as the Gulag system faded from memory in the 1970s and 1980s.¹⁶ This violence was embraced by the younger generation and

---

not altogether opposed by their elders. Certainly was the case with Russia’s longlasting and extremely powerful vor, Aslan Usoyan (aka Grandpa Khasan) who, although he was crowned early on in the Gulag, was imprisoned at least eight different times and believed to be responsible for a number of extremely bloody gangwars and murders.\footnote{Shaun Walker “The Death of Moscow’s Don: Aslan Usoyan Gunned Down Outside His Favorite Restaurant,” The Independent, January 17, 2013, accessed February 21, 2015, \url{http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/the-death-of-moscow-s-don-aslan-usoyan-gunned-down-outside-his-favourite-restaurant-8456443.html}}

However, Usoyan remained virtually untouched by law enforcement after the collapse of the Soviet Union, as most criminal kingpins did. His death was seen as a tragedy despite his open reputation as a thief-in-law and his adherence to thief tradition in most cases. Usoyan was only ultimately phased out of the criminal world the same way that most vory chieftans are: not by law enforcement intervention but rather by assassination at the hands of a rival organization due to strong political connections.\footnote{David Satter, Darkness at Dawn: The Rise of the Russian Criminal State (Chicago, IL: R. R. Donnelley & Sons, 2003) 127-134.} January 16, 2013 Usoyan was shot in the neck when leaving a restaurant by an unknown sniper. Never working directly with politicians or authorities, unlike the younger generation, Usoyan was seen as a “dying breed” in reference to Russia’s old-school mobsters that have been all but replaced by the recent generations willing to cooperate with the authorities and political entities, as well as operate legitimate businesses, all against the thieves’ laws.\footnote{Ibid.} Journalists and reporters were warned away from Usoyan’s funeral by other known Russian crimelords, uniformed police were notably absent as well, as top criminals paid their respects to one of the last “great patriarchs of the thieves’ world.”\footnote{“Fathers and Sons,” The Economist, January 26, 2013, accessed February 21, 2015, \url{http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21570721-upsurge-violence-streets-points-rising-instability-fathers-and-sons}}

Modern Russia and the Rise of the Avtoritety

\textit{The Fall of the Vory v Zakone}

The younger generation of thieves, known as the avtoritety, do not adhere to traditions.\footnote{\textit{Avtoritety} is Russian for “authority” which refers to one of the many hierarchical ranks in the traditional criminal underworld. This generation uses wealth and corruption as the basis of their power rather than status and intimidation.} Avtoritety live lavishly, running large legitimate businesses as well as illegitimate ones, and deal directly with politicians to ensure protection, unlike their predecessors.\footnote{Sokolov, “From Guns to Briefcases,” 69.} This was the direct result of the conflicts in the Gulag between those who would cooperate with the authorities for self-gain and those who held true to the traditional laws. The emergence of splinter groups, scolded by their elders for their profit-seeking and cooperation with the state, led to the creation of a black market of corruption and bribery between the criminal underworld and the state. Criminal cooperation with the government in exchange for protection and profits steadily increased after Stalin’s death all the way into the present day. The end result was a shadow economy that left the soviet state heavily dependent on illegal manufacturing and goods.\footnote{Ibid., 69-70.}

This evolution appalled the vory, who held together vorovskoi mir along with their decreasing number of followers. The idealistic lives of the thieves could only last in the
communist Soviet Union where the everyday man was not driven by the ideals of profit, but rather by survival. In a modern capitalist Russia, only the most prestigious and powerful vory survived alongside the wealth driven avtoritety, the rest fell victim to a world where power was no longer the currency but currency was the new power. By the late 1990s the vory v zakone had lost its dominance in the criminal underworld, just as it had lost its crime monopoly, to the dread suki, those who wished to deal with authorities and the legitimate business world to secure the survival of their criminal enterprises.  

**The Avtoritety and Vorovskoi Mir**

As previously mentioned, this new generation pulled away from tradition, cutting all ties with their own history. However, this did not necessarily erase the thieves’ world. Many of the avtoritety openly embraced the use of the traditional tattoos and slang throughout the late twentieth century. Violent gang wars erupted throughout the 1990s, exposing the fragile nature of both the state and the criminal underworld now linked to it. There were losses both sides of the spectrum and it has been unclear for the last couple of decades which group remains on top. However, the importance of these gang wars cannot be understated. It is here that the new generation cut their ties completely with the old world, now the tattoos and slang so eagerly incorporated into their own organization was erased. A respectable young Russian criminal has never been caught (whereas it was a thief’s honor to have been imprisoned multiple times and survived), has no tattoos, no ties with the thieves’ world, and speaks the language of politicians and businessmen worldwide.

The case of Ruslan Kolyak, a powerful avtoritet in St. Petersburg, the outcome was still the same as many vor’s fate. Despite being the owner of two large security firms with numerous other financial interests and having survived nine assassination attempts, he was killed in August 2003 by unknown assailants. Journalist Alexander Gorshkov commented on the differences between the criminal generations: “today’s criminal wears an Armani suit instead of a leather jacket, and his best friend is his accountant, not his bodyguard.” Nonetheless, the avtoritety are still certainly shaped by vorovskoi mir, no matter how dismissive they are of it and the vory v zakone.

**New Crimes in a New Russia**

Although both Ruslan Kolyak and Aslan Usoyan died as victims of what seems to be rival based criminal war, they approached crime almost exactly opposite of each other. Kolyak denied all ties to the criminal underworld and was seen as nothing more than a legitimate businessman in the public’s eyes. On the other hand, Usoyan was openly seen, and celebrated, and criminal kingpin responsible for murder, extortion, and numerous other crimes. The difference was that Usoyan remained true to thief tradition and reached a level of local folklore similar to Vanka Kain in the eighteenth century. Kolyak was undoubtedly not guilty of any crimes similar to murder or extortion. Kolyak was a modern criminal, an avtoritet, and therefore committed crimes related to wealth as a true benefactor to the collapse of the communist system:

---

23 Sokolov, “From Guns to Briefcases,” 70-71.
24 Ibid., 70-73.
25 Ibid., 72-73.
27 Shaun Walker “The Death of Moscow’s Don.”
money laundering, bribery, and illicit sales. Which is worse? Although Kolyak himself most likely never committed a violent crime, his well-paid and well-armed thugs certainly did, and most likely very frequently. 28 Usayan enjoyed the fear and respect that a vor believed they so rightly deserved and had focused his enterprise on defending itself from other organizations rather than expanding. 29

Vorovskoi Mir’s Evolution

Future Implications

In the event of the complete dissolution of the vory, which can only be accomplished through an eruption of extremely bloody crime wars, it is likely that Russia will see a drop in organized violent crime as rival gangs are exterminated or crippled. However, if the avtoriety manages to dominate the mafiya superstructure it is also likely that the revenue from illegal operations, both in Russia and abroad, will exceed Russia’s legal revenue as it has in recent years. It is estimated that over $80 billion was sent to Russia by their organized crime networks in the United States alone from January 1992 to January 2000, far surpassing the total value of all the Russian rubles in circulation. 30 Alongside this, a rise in cybercrime and industrial espionage can also be expected; a symptom that has already began to reveal itself in recent years. Leonid “Mackintosh” Bilunov, a high ranking vor currently living in France, stated that “today, the mafiya in Russia is a group of government officials,” and, in the vory’s defense, poses the question: “who is a bigger criminal? The one who leaves hundreds of thousands of people destitute, without money to subsist on, or the one who picks pockets?” 31

Conclusion

The decline of the traditional vory v zakone, the godfathers of Russian organized crime that, by the mid-1990s, controlled not only Russia’s criminal underworld but also the criminal underworld of many of the former Soviet republics has ushered in a new breed of Russian criminal for the last several decades: the avtoriety. 32 From the 1990s to the present day, Russia has endured numerous gang wars between these two castes in order to assert dominance while both organizations enjoy the protection of key government officials. However, since the Russian mafiya has always been a decentralized grouping of consistently changing alliances with mutual interests, it is also likely that no matter which organization achieves dominance, the superstructure of Russian organized crime at home and abroad will remain at equilibrium by means of violent criminal conflict. 33 The vory most likely will never gain their original footing and can only hope to survive, but after all that is what they had done in the industrial slums and

---

28 Sokolov, “From Guns to Briefcases,” 72-73.
29 “Fathers and Sons.”
31 Thieves by Law: The Real Godfathers of the Russian Mafia, directed by Alexander Gentelev (2010; Leipzing, Germany: LE Vision Film 2010), DVD.
33 Sokolov, “From Guns to Briefcases,” 68-69.
in the Gulag. Once united in poverty and ill-fortune, criminals in Russia are now divided in wealth and luxury. However, this does not assure the destruction of *vorovskoi mir* but rather its evolution as the crucial key to understanding Russia’s criminal underworld.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

