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Gangs of Russia: From the streets to the corridors of power

by Svetlana Stephenson

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Reviewed by David Holohan

From Nordic to Italian 'noir' and on to the tremendously popular gripping French crime series *Engrenages* (a.k.a. *Spiral*) and *Braquo* (meaning 'brotherhood'), both set in the environs of Paris and featuring mostly criminals of Eastern European origin, it would seem that we all like to be entertained and shocked by the gritty reality and violence of organized crime and the travails of cops and law enforcers who struggle to clean up the streets and bring the culprits to justice. And there is, apparently, more of the same in the offing. Work has already been commissioned by the French TV network Canal+ for a sixth series of *Engrenages*, and *Braquo* already runs to four. A similar Italian suspenseful multi-series thriller set in Rome has already been aired, financed by Sky, under the title *Romanzo Criminale*, itself an offshoot of the tremendously popular homonymous feature film directed by Michele Placido (2005) and adapted from the best-seller by Giancarlo De Cataldo. Crime lovers of more delicate sensibilities can always turn to the less racy and more understated serving of the ever-popular Andrea Camilleri's detective Montalbano, or the even more refined escapades of the fictional 19th century Russian detective Fandorin, created by Boris Akunin, also adapted for the silver screen.

Crime books written by the Italian investigative journalist Roberto Saviano, which rapidly became international bestsellers printed by the millions – *Gomorrah* (2006) and *Zero Zero Zero* (2013) – are perhaps even more shocking, albeit to the mind's eye, because they deal with real events offered as bald reportage: the former describes the nefarious business of the Camorra, the powerful Neapolitan mafia-like organization (later made into a grim, though gripping, film (2008), which necessitated Saviano to engage full-time bodyguards after a Rushdie-style 'fatwa' was pronounced upon his life by the godfathers he investigated. Undaunted, Saviano's subsequent offering is a detailed exposé of the worldwide cocaine trade and its underground distribution network of dealers and users, published under the title of *Zero Zero Zero*, so called, with his characteristic black humour, which references the ubiquitous white powder, as readily available and accessible

as the finest grade of pasta flour, '00' or *doppio zero*. This guy must really enjoy playing with fire, or has a serious disregard for his own personal safety!

On a more academic and less populist note, although just as fascinating and highly informative as the films and books mentioned above, is the seminal work that has been published on Russian organized crime, which was too hot a subject to broach in the Soviet press and, to a certain extent, remained so for years, even under *glasnost*. Academics and sociologists have for some years been casting light upon the dark recesses of pre- and post-Soviet corruption:

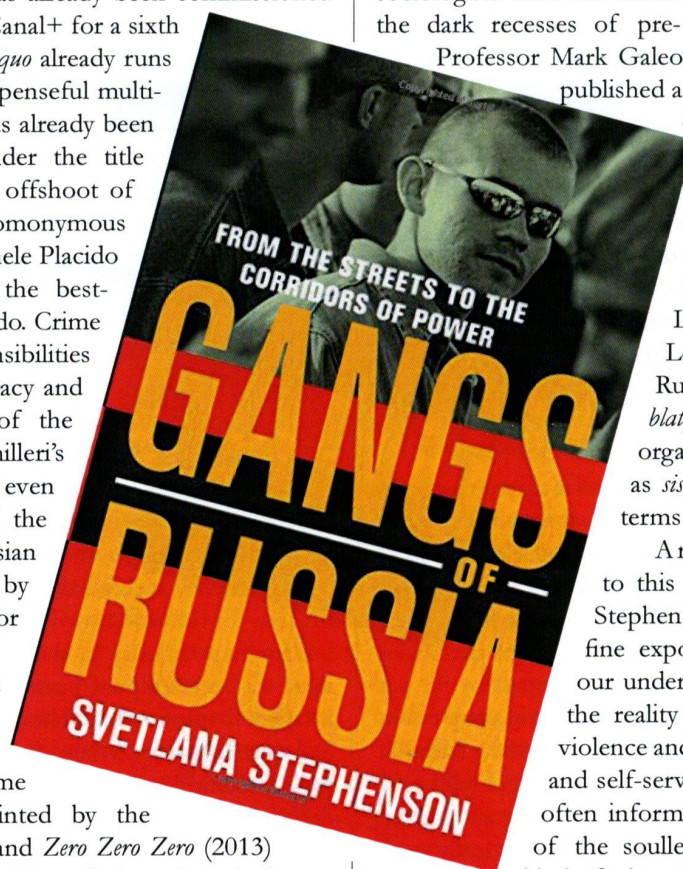
Professor Mark Galeotti (New York University) has published a series of articles in the journal

Global Crime and has made numerous contributions to books on the Russian mafia and the 'lower depths' of Russian society. Nearer to home, Professor Alena Ledeneva (University College London, SSEES) has written on Russia's 'economy of favours' (or *blat*) – a small step towards more organized, wider networks, known as *sistema*, which includes what she terms 'power networks'.

A recent and valuable contribution to this field of study is Dr Svetlana Stephenson's book *Gangs of Russia*, a fine exposé that contributes much to our understanding of the very roots of the reality of Russian 'corruption [...], violence and crime', the 'primitive brutality and self-serving parochial ties' which start, often informally, in the *dvory* (or *courtyards*) of the soulless suburban *khreshchevki*, the kind of place which 'maketh the man', as we

know was the case even for Vladimir Putin, who "hooked up" with the neighbourhood boys who ran around in packs, or gangs, and got into fights'.¹

Dr Stephenson, a Reader in Sociology at London Metropolitan University, conducted her ground-breaking research based on the youth gangs in Kazan, which first came to light through the criminal trial of the gang known as Tiap-Liap. Tiap-Liap was headed by an ex-convict called Sergei Antipov who, having done a 'stretch' in prison, set up a boxing club for the local kids and ruled them with a rod of



¹ Fiona Hill & Clifford G Gaddy, *Mr Putin: Operative in the Kremlin*, Brookings Institution Press, 2015.

iron, instilling in them a strange morality highly reminiscent of the Kray Brothers in London's East End. The gang was formed in the 1970s and grew in size and influence, along with its 'business affairs', which extended to extortion, black-marketeering, protectionism, breaking and entering, etc., although the members 'saw themselves as morally upright citizens who, in line with Soviet ideology, were acting against the "unearned" incomes of [other] blackmarketeers'.

Stephenson reveals: 'Research conducted by Soviet police criminologists established that, by the end of the 1980s, every third young man between twelve and eighteen in Kazan was a member of a gang', and she charts what these young people were to become as Russia passed through the economically disastrous 1980s into the state of capitalism *à la russe*. The Tiap-Liap gang members were prosecuted in 1979-80, but the details were, characteristically for the time, not reported officially in the press until this kind of *omertà* was eventually broken by readers' letters submitted to *Vecherniaia Kazan*.

After that, the phenomenon of violent street gangs of youths warring to defend their turf began to appear in other local newspapers, as it became obvious that 'Kazan was not an isolated case of the transformation of youth street peer groups into more organized territorial elites and entrepreneurial gangs'.

I remember visiting a school in a south-eastern district of Moscow where my university students attended a language course in the early 1990s. We were housed in Zhdanovskaia, a working-class area later renamed Vykhino. The former Higher Party School was there. A teacher asked her class, which had been studying local history: 'What is our region famous for?' A bright-eyed little boy shot up his hand and offered the enthusiastic response, 'Crime!'. The teacher was terribly embarrassed, since that was clearly not the expected, official response.

Stephenson examines in great detail the inter-gang relationships and the ties that bind the members together. The ties often become looser as the young men progress from school to adulthood and separate to do national service, sometimes having to serve in theatres of war. That, in turn, forges bonds of another kind of brotherhood, based on a different shared experience. She shows how it is

very much a man's world, though women are entertained on the periphery, like classic gangsters' molls. She describes the efforts made by the police and law enforcers to clean up the streets and deal with the rampant criminality of the eighties, nineties and beyond, or not, as the case may be, should they choose to turn a blind eye in return for a 'back-hander'. She explores what these often, and surprisingly, well-educated gang members turn into in later life, and reproduces verbatim their frank testimony offered in interviews which make fascinating reading and add a poignant personal note. As with the Kray Brothers, those involved in dark, shadowy activities cannot simply be dismissed as psychopaths and rotten apples. They are shown to have a strange moral code and set of values, often testifying to there indeed being honour among thieves. This *modus vivendi* is known as *ponatiia* or *poniatie*, which the Glossary defines as '(mutual) "understanding(s)" – rule(s) of conduct in criminal communities, now commonly used to describe informal

conventions of rules'. This notwithstanding their capacity for the most violent behaviour and liberal use of knuckle-dusters. Knives and guns are generally frowned upon, however, as is brutality toward females and children.

It is an ugly world of dog-eat-dog and it is hardly surprising that the interviewees wished



Still hooking-up with the neighbourhood boys - Sochi October 2015.

Picture Credit: Kremlin.ru.

to remain semi-anonymous.

This was especially in case they should later achieve a new-found and more conventional respectability within society. Their first names are given, along with their ages and a brief description of who they are in terms of ethnicity, education and profession.

A very informative Bibliography provides suggested reading for anyone wishing to delve further into this murky world, and there is a useful Index and Glossary of Russian terms used, with English definitions.

Svetlana Stephenson has previously published *Crossing the Line: Vagrancy, Homelessness and Social Displacement in Russia*. She has also co-edited *Youth and Social Change in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union* – all admirable books which shed light on the trials and tribulations of the peoples of the former USSR throughout a period of radical change, which at times seems almost as brutal and bewildering as the first few decades of the last century. □