Challenging the Russian Mafia Mystique

by James O. Finckenauer and Elin Waring
The tall man with dark hair and eyes sweeps out of a Lincoln Navigator wearing a long, black leather coat, an impeccably tailored suit, and a scar that everyone knows not to mention. He runs his organization with an iron fist and demands absolute loyalty from his “family.” His English has only a slight Russian accent, and he has influential friends in the U.S. Congress, courts, and law enforcement—friends over whom he has considerable influence. This godfather stereotype is often the perception that Americans have about criminals who have arrived here from the former Soviet Union and the so-called “Russian Mafia.” It is almost entirely inaccurate.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, movies and television shows featured depictions of criminals from the former Soviet Union as the newest type of “romantic” gangster, and newspapers and magazines published chilling articles about “Russian godfathers.” Although a few serious works have begun to appear, such as Russian Organized Crime: The New Threat? edited by Phil Williams and Red Mafia by Robert I. Friedman, what is known is still more anecdotal than empirical in nature.

It was in response to this absence of solid information that a consortium of law enforcement organizations in New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania created the Tri-State Joint Soviet-Emigre Organized Crime Project (TSP) in 1992. (See “Studying Russian Crime and Criminals,” page 4.) Drawing on information collected by TSP and several other research initiatives, the research reported here describes the historical context, the types of crime in which Russian criminals in the United States have been implicated, the extent to which these activities fit definitions and understandings of organized crime, and most importantly, whether what is seen is mafia-like. (See “Defining Organized Crime,” page 5.) For purposes of simplicity, all persons in question will be referred to as Russians.

Historical Context of Russian Crime

The use of bribery, black markets, and other schemes to survive in Soviet society is well documented. Although a few serious works have begun to appear, such as Russian Organized Crime: The New Threat? edited by Phil Williams and Red Mafia by Robert I. Friedman, what is known is still more anecdotal than empirical in nature.

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The study of organized crime is a difficult and often risky undertaking. Many of the methods commonly employed in criminological research, such as survey research and self-report studies, are either inappropriate or not applicable. Thus, the opportunity presented to Finckenauer and Waring to affiliate with the Tri-State Joint Soviet-Emigre Organized Crime Project (TSP) provided unprecedented access to a wide range of information and sources. In return for unrestricted access, the researchers agreed not to compromise the investigative techniques employed nor to disclose any information pertinent to active criminal cases.

The agencies in the consortium were the New York State Organized Crime Task Force, the New York State Commission of Investigation, the Pennsylvania Crime Commission, and the New Jersey State Commission of Investigation. The consortium’s directive was “to identify the nature and extent of Russian-emigre crime within the tri-State region... in order to assist law enforcement in its ongoing effort to combat the threat of organized crime.”

This joint intelligence, investigative, and prosecutorial effort set about to accomplish three goals—to identify the participants, to describe their criminal activities, and to analyze the markets in which the criminal activities occur.

TSP generated considerable source material, and the authors pursued a cooperative agreement with TSP as the primary data source. The project provided data on the types of offending by Russians who had come to the attention of the participating agencies. The information came in seven forms—indictments, newspaper and magazine articles, telephone records, general undercover observation reports, surveillance reports, confidential informant interviews, and various other reports—and included 404 separate documents in a variety of formats and lengths. Although each of the seven source types had deficiencies, the sources complemented one another and provided information that was more reliable and valid than any other single source.

In addition to the information garnered from TSP, research was conducted through several other research initiatives to collect a large quantity of written materials, including a mailed questionnaire and in-depth interviews with a variety of individuals, including:

- Writers and journalists who had studied and written about Soviet organized crime.
- Residents and businesspersons in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn, which is alleged to be the center of Russian criminal activities in the United States.
- Key community figures in the large emigre communities in Brighton Beach and Philadelphia.
- Law enforcement professionals (both in the United States and the former U.S.S.R.).

practices, such as bartering and deal making, became the means that Soviets used to get what they needed and to do what they wanted. The children learned from watching their parents deal with the shadow economy or black market: You had to manipulate the system or you and your family would suffer.

Taking advantage of shortages, an illegal second, or shadow, economy began to work alongside the official economy. This economy was made up of the activities deemed necessary by factory managers, farm directors, and others in similar positions to exceed their production quotas and produce profits and income outside official channels. The shadow economy also was a means for citizens to obtain legal goods in an illegal manner.

The black market, a second aspect of the illegal economy, was used to obtain illegal items, including Western products as well as stolen goods, drugs, and bootleg liquor and cigarettes. This market was comprised of work activities carried out for private gain, such as carpentry, plumbing, and electrical work that was officially unauthorized. Instead of being curtailed by the collapse of the Soviet Union, evidence indicates that black market activity actually has increased. The amount of money exchanging hands is greater, and the number of items on the black market is more extensive—it now includes antiques, stolen cars, precious metals, and advanced weapons, including nuclear weapons materials.

Russian Crime in the United States

It isn’t surprising that criminals who emigrated from the former Soviet Union would commit crime based on their past experiences. In fact, one could easily imagine that some who left the Soviet Union simply continued their old ways and saw...
Defining Organized Crime

Three assumptions helped shape the basis of this research into Russian crime. The first is that a criminal organization can be usefully examined both in terms of its structure and the activities in which it engages; second, that a criminal organization is not synonymous with organized crime; and third, that the nature and extent of harm caused is an essential dimension for characterizing a criminal organization.

Organized crime is typically defined by three characteristics: criminal monopoly, violence, and corruption. Although other forms of criminal organization may involve one or two of these activities, true organized crime is unique because all three are essential, each one reinforcing the other two.

A monopoly (total control of a market) is gained through the threat and use of violence and the corruption of the legal and political systems. This impact of the illegal activity and makes it harder to detect. For example, in the early 1990’s a Pennsylvania automobile insurance ring staged automobile accidents that resulted in more than $1 million in phony claims. This scheme, which illegally used people in the legitimate economy, was led by the owner of a medical clinic and at least one doctor employed at the clinic.

Other fraud involves confidence schemes in which the victims are often members of the Russian community, which varies from the old belief that it was all right to steal from the government but not from citizens. For example, an emigre may purchase a ticket to Russia for his mother from a Russian travel agency, but because the agency is a criminal front, a ticket is never received. Other operations organized by Russian offenders have included making counterfeit credit cards, checks, Immigration and Naturalization Service documents, passports, and other documents.

In addition to the fraud and counterfeiting allegations, Russians are involved in drug and drug paraphernalia markets, including the importation and street-level sale of drugs. Evidence indicates that Russians have cooperated with other ethnic groups, such as Colombian drug cartels. In addition, the former Republics of the Soviet Union serve as transshipment points for importation of drugs into the United States. Smuggling has involved more than drugs and drug-related items; smuggled products include aluminum, weapons, and currency, among others.

Russian criminals in the tri-State region have shown a willingness and capacity to use violence, including murder, extortion, and assaults. Additional information was found on this topic when another data...
source was used to complement the information garnered from TSP—interviews with residents in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn, the oldest and most prominent Russian community in the United States. A transplanted Russian, who is now a teacher in Brighton Beach, gave a detailed description of this trend toward the use of violence in the criminal arena.

Russian murderers are being ordered and brought from Russia to complete a specific task of killing someone. The mafia shows them who to kill and that is the end of it. It is planned and organized pretty well. However, I don’t think that Russians occupy any of the higher positions in the criminal structure.

Since 1981, investigators have reported at least 65 murders and attempted murders in the tri-State area involving Russians that have indications of organized crime involvement. These murders do not appear to be either systematic or designed to protect a criminal enterprise, but instead are motivated mainly by greed or personal vendettas.


The notion of mafia is associated most often with Sicily and southern Italy. The Sicilian Mafia is said to be a way of life that is particularly Sicilian, with a code based on Sicilian traditions and customs. The notions of honor, respect, and omerta (code of silence) are critical to defining the mafia. The so-called Russian Mafia, however, is not associated with honor and respect and should not be confused with the real thing.

The label Russian Mafia offers a convenient hook for understanding, but at the same time sensationalizes matters so as to peak interest. The use of the term Russian Mafia may actually create a self-fulfilling prophecy in which people—whether Russian emigres, members of the general public, law enforcement officials, or journalists—map their images of mafia onto the crimes that occur in Brighton Beach and elsewhere. A criminal group gains stature when it is called “mafia,” which only heightens its power.

Regardless, some law enforcement authorities and journalists have described Russian criminals operating in the United States as being structured in the manner of the mafia or La Cosa Nostra (the U.S.-based version). For example, when Vyacheslav Ivankov, nicknamed "Yaponchik" or "Little Japanese," was arrested in June 1995, he was labeled the “capo di tutti capos” (boss of all bosses) of Russian crime in the United States. Officials viewed Ivankov’s arrest as proof of Russian organized crime in the United States. His known association with the Solntsevskaya gang, the largest gang in the former Soviet Union, strengthened the idea that he was the leader of a group similar to La Cosa Nostra. Ivankov is believed to be one of the Russian vory, and perhaps even among the top leadership group.

Other authorities believe that Russian crime networks and organizational structures in this country do not look anything like La Cosa Nostra. According to this viewpoint, criminals from the former Soviet Union operate mostly as individual specialists instead of with the hierarchical structure traditionally associated with continuing criminal enterprises. Because they operate in this manner, the groups are variable and occasionally come together to commit a crime. This point of view suggests that the Russian crime groups are not rigidly authoritarian and that the people involved do not answer to anybody in particular. When these groups do work together, it is in a market-like manner, choosing others to work with purely because of the expected financial return on their collaboration.

But neither view is entirely correct. Data indicate that the individuals identified by law enforcement as involved in or suspected of criminal activities are part of large, ongoing networks of criminals. Although...
analyses found no evidence of a complex hierarchy or set of hierarchies, they did find ad hoc teams that come together for specific criminal ventures, forming opportunistic partnerships. In these groups, organizational structure is created on an as-needed basis to enable the co-offenders to carry out particular crimes. They often create flexible, project-oriented structures similar to some licit organizations.

Many legitimate organizations have moved to decrease the amount and degree of hierarchy and to increase the reliance on strategic partnerships and task groups and on third-party service providers. This style of organization seems to be effective for both licit and illicit enterprises. These forms of organization also are similar to those seen among Russian offenders in the tri-State area.

What is not found is evidence of mafia-like structures or activities. Ironically, Russian criminals have adopted the structure of many legitimate organizations, which is becoming more horizontal rather than vertical in nature.

Of the tools used by sophisticated criminal organizations—monopoly, violence, and corruption—violence is the only one that is seen as typical of Russian criminals. The evidence does not indicate monopolization of criminal markets or a systematic use of corruption.

The prevailing structure of U.S.-based Russian organized crime can be attributed to a number of forces. Of primary importance, this structure is a continuation of the patterns and practices that were so common in the former Soviet Union. Second, this loose, flexible structure is well-suited to the types of crime in which these criminals are involved. Crimes such as fraud and confidence schemes and certain violent crimes are particularly suited to this type of structure because they require teamwork, flexibility, and the ability to imitate the operation of a legitimate actor or organization. But because Russian crime and the nature of Russian criminal organizations in this country are evolving, this picture also could change.

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Notes

3. Freeh, Louis, Testimony before the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigation, May 25, 1994, 100 Russell Senate Office Building, Washington, DC.


For More Information