



A mad crowd: Skinhead youth and the rise of nationalism in post-communist Russia

Peter Worger

Department of History, University of California, Berkeley, United States

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the emergence of skinhead groups in Russia and the extent to which this subculture has influenced and been influenced by political developments in the country. The research builds on a wide variety of sources in order to explain the complex processes at work that have led to this social phenomenon. I intend to show that these groups signify a fundamental trend in Russian political culture rather than operating on the margins of it, and that they are the result of political reformations in the country and the spread of global capitalism.

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1. Introduction

The Russian skinhead subculture first emerged in the early 1990s, in an atmosphere of chaos following the liberal reform attempts of Mikhail Gorbachev and the subsequent dissolution of the Soviet Union. It was thereafter fostered by the unstable situation in the country throughout the next decade. In the 90s the numbers of skinheads grew slowly, unnoticed or discredited by mainstream society as an anomaly or invention of the press, until at the turn of the century cries of nationalist fervor and acts of violence began to multiply, and this social problem was transformed into an amoebic political movement with anti-government sentiments. Mainstream political trends have coincided with the ideological underpinnings of these groups in the decades following dissolution, and the self-perceived rebels owe much of their existence to the effect of nationalist policies initiated by Vladimir Putin in his attempts to reinvigorate Russian patriotism and gain political legitimacy. Despite the overlap between the Kremlin and these groups in their political ideas, skinheads and other right-wing extremists remain unequivocally antagonistic to vestiges of authority in the country. These groups are defined by a kind of grassroots fascism and they use the fears and aggressions of many common Russians to propose a sort of populist, ultra-nationalist alternative to Putin's state-sanctioned patriotism.

To describe the arc of this movement I will first outline the general theory behind the interaction of subculture with mainstream society, as formulated by sociologists Dick Hebdige and Stuart Hall. My analysis will focus on the original skinheads in England, taking into account the class antagonisms, immigration trends, and economic situation that lead to their creation. This will also include a general theory of symbolization and signifying practices to explain how these groups use dress code and behavior to define themselves as apart from the mainstream. Then I will briefly discuss the history of skinhead groups in Russia; their first appearances and provide data on the number of skinheads throughout the last two decades; their transformation from soccer hooligans to Neo-Nazis and finally to anti-government terrorists. I will track the trajectory of the skinhead group Mad Crowd in particular because over the course of the group's existence the lead members dismiss their original Neo-Nazi ideology as primitive and become increasingly anti-establishment and ultimately plan an attack on the G8 summit in St. Petersburg in 2006. The following section describes the rise of nationalism in the country and Putin's attempts to cultivate patriotism, as well as the government's legislative responses to the skinhead movement. Finally, I

will discuss the political dimension of the skinheads' use of violence, map the types of hate crimes and their volume over the course of the past decade.

2. Theoretical interpretations of the skinhead subculture

According to Hebdige (2004, p. 83) skinheads emerged out of a period in English history characterized by “the decline of the Welfare State, the faltering economy, the continuing scarcity of jobs and adequate housing, the loss of community, [and] the failure of consumerism to satisfy real needs,” a situation that resembles the state of Russia after the fall of communism. In England the working class was trapped and incapable of finding alternatives in other sectors due to the rigidity of the class system. In reaction, skinheads asserted their class origins by adopting a style that portrayed hardness, masculinity, and working-classness. Hall and Jefferson (2006, p. 44) explain that the symbolic representation of these qualities had agency in forming “a unity with the group’s relations, situation, [and] experience.” In this way they could feel empowered within their positions of powerlessness and express their alienation from and animosity toward the dominant class.

Following these ‘traditional’ skinheads emerged a second-wave, racist variant in the late 1970s under the influence of Stuart Ian Donaldson. Though first-wave skins identified with their white working class origins they also incorporated the style of West Indian immigrants who had gradually filtered into their low-income neighborhoods. In contrast, the second-wave rejected interethnic exchange. In 1977 Donaldson started “a rock group called *Skrewdriver*, who performed their songs in celebration of Viking and Nazi myth;” then later “a political action group... White Noise, which allied itself to the neo-fascist British National Front” (Shenfield, 2001, p. 81). Donaldson is most remembered worldwide for establishing Blood & Honor in 1987, which has spread to Russia with an active membership in Moscow (Tarasov, 2004). Though the community aspect of skinhead style originated in low-income neighborhoods, the modern movement draws members from all income levels in Russia. The racist and fascist ideology of the second-wave skinhead movement contributed to the transformation of the style from working class to white power internationally.

Sociologist Pilkington (1994, p. 250), in her study of skinheads in Vorkuta, Russia, citing Hebdige, argues that the class interpretation of subculture should not be applied to the Russian example, because young Russians lack “conscious class identification,” and style in Russian culture “highlights the significance of social anomie, immigration and ghettoization in former Soviet society,” rather than working-classness as described above. The lack of class identification, due in large part to the efforts of the Soviet Union in propagating an egalitarian view of society, implies that a skinhead subculture could not emerge as a working class movement. This explanation is supported by the degree to which first wave skin ideology, that of multicultural commingling, is dramatically underrepresented in Russia and the fascist groups have been most prominent.

Pilkington et al. (2010, p. 164) also make a significant contribution to understanding subculture by distinguishing between “visual’ and ‘performative’ style.” The visual style is the shaved head, the combat boots, the braces, and any other visual signifiers directed at other skinheads and non-skinheads alike. These are seen as important only as “temporary foci for group identification” (Pilkington et al., 2010, p. 13). Performative style on the other hand is expressed in piercing practices, tattooing, gym training, boxing within the group, and other communal activities. These rituals are important for the group in relating to one another. The Vorkuta skins in her study proved to be less dependent on their visual style to define themselves and more so on the way in which performative rituals allowed them to create “intimacies, bonds and solidarities” (Pilkington et al., 2010, p. 164). The process of identification found in both the visual and performative dimension of skinhead style creates an identity “somewhere deep inside, hidden away from view, but intact and no less committed” that speaks to the individual (Pilkington et al., 2010, p. 152). Skinhead style becomes internalized and transcends the notion that subculture is only worn or expressed through symbols.

A reading of subcultural style as “only for resistance” is faulty for this “ignores any affirmation of dominant, commercial culture or chooses to re-read [style] as concealing a covert meaning” (Pilkington et al., 2010, p. 36). This interpretation leads us to question whether skinheads in Russia are occupying a space of resistance against the politics of the administration or are the result of nationalist policies in the country. After much research into the subject it is clear that “there is much in common between the articulated views of the skinhead group... and the ‘everyday’ racism and xenophobia of the general public” (Pilkington et al., 2010, p. 13). Despite the similarities found between the nationalist policies promoted by the Kremlin and the viewpoints of skinheads in general, the movement has paradoxically become increasingly anti-establishment; and although their racism coincides with ‘everyday’ racism, skinheads put these prejudices into action through the perpetration of ethnic violence. Skinhead organizations are on the same end of the spectrum politically as mainstream society but have taken these beliefs to extremes that have shocked the general public and political administration.

3. Skinheads in Russia. Precursors

The precursors of this movement emerged during a tumultuous period in Russian history. A combination of youth gang violence and fascist ideology merged following the transition from socialism to democracy. *Glasnost* allowed the airing of grievances in public discourse while *perestroika* provided the structural instability to stoke the fires of discontent. In the more open environment of *glasnost* behaviors that had been previously repressed, including “hippies and punks, night bikers and drug addicts, soccer hooligans and muggers, glue sniffers and prostitutes, vigilante gangs and skinheads, Zen Buddhists and Hari Krishna followers, even Swastika-sporting young neofascists” were suddenly revealed (Riordan, 1989, p. 122). Rebellious youth elements, previously submerged in obscurity by cultural restrictions, emerged during this opening up, and Riordan

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