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Crime and Punishment in the USSR Today

What could bring the crime-hardened police chief of a major US metropolitan area to the point of a heart attack? According to Yuri Schekochikin, his stories of organized crime in the Soviet Union almost did. Schekochikin, an investigative reporter for *Literaturnaya Gazeta* and a People's Deputy in the Supreme Soviet, related some of his experiences and investigations of the darker side of *perestroika* to the Harriman Institute on February 21, 1991.

Organized crime in the Soviet Union, or what the Soviets call their "mafia," cannot be understood in the usual Western sense of the term. While organized crime in the West traditionally is engaged in fields such as drug peddling and prostitution, the Soviet mafia, according to Schekochikin, is ubiquitous. The very nature of the Soviet sociopolitical and economic system gives rise to all sorts of criminality and corruption, making it very difficult for Westerners to comprehend the extent of crime in the USSR. For Schekochikin, "A discussion of the mafia in the USSR is above all a discussion not of the criminal, but of the political."

Riddles for Karl Marx

By its very nature, the Soviet system is peculiarly vulnerable to widespread corruption. In the first place, the Soviet mafia is a product of the shortage economy. Money is not the guarantor of a consumer's ability to purchase something, one's connections are. Therefore, unofficial channels of distribution become more important than official ones. Schekochikin calls this the fundamental contradiction of Soviet society: "In the homes there is everything, in the stores there is nothing. That is a riddle for which Karl Marx would not have an answer." Secondly, for ideological reasons, what would be considered normal and permissible economic activity in another system is proscribed for Soviet citizens. Despite recent moves to legalize private economic activity,

"speculators" still are routinely criticized in the Soviet press:

The tangible consequence of this unofficial system of distribution is corruption on a massive scale. While most people occupied in the so-called shadow economy may not consider themselves to be members of the mafia, they are, in effect, a manifestation of it. For Schekochikin, this is a direct result of the system. "In order to receive from the government special power, authority, money, or privileges, it was *absolutely essential* to participate in what seems to me to be criminal activities. How difficult it is for us now to break this, because for many people it has caused a transformation in the values of life. That which seems unhealthy has become healthy, it has become the norm."

Thus, it is necessary to distinguish between activity that is really an outgrowth of the system, and that which is truly criminal. To understand the phenomenon of organized crime in the Soviet Union properly, Schekochikin argued, the Soviets should use the term "mafia" to denote what it denotes everywhere else: organized involvement in narcotics, prostitution, and the like; but that "that which the very system gave birth to and which the system considered criminal, we must sooner or later consider the norms of the system."

Schekochikin also dismisses many of the proposed remedies for Soviet problems offered by what he calls "the romantic economists of the West." Conventional wisdom suggests that to eliminate shortages, you let prices rise, and producers will respond in kind. For Schekochikin, however, the problem is much more than an economic one, because it permeates the very nature of the Soviet system and the psychology of the Soviet people.

Obviously, making such claims against the Soviet system did not endear Schekochikin to the Soviet leadership. Two years ago, Schekochikin wrote his first article on the topic of the Soviet mafia. An unending stream of attacks



ensued. Disgruntled party leaders and police officials from around the country demanded explanations for what he had said, and claimed that there was no such thing as a mafia. As the economic situation in the Soviet Union has deteriorated, however, so has the official position on the existence of organized crime. Nowadays, *all* the problems of the past seventy-three years are blamed on the mafia, to the extent that an article in the newspaper *Pravda* claimed, "If it had not been for the mafia, we would already have built communism."

Why this change in attitude on the part of officialdom? For Schekochikin, the answer is simple. The party hacks realized that dissatisfaction with the CPSU and the bureaucracy was rising, so they had to create something to deflect the criticism. "To party functionaries, and all those who want to return to the old forms of 'brutal government,' the mafia and the shadow economy are two scarecrows for the population," Schekochikin said.

The Case of the Missing Kopeks

The power of the bureaucracy in the Soviet Union, and the extent to which it is willing to go to obstruct reform, is exemplified by an anecdote Schekochikin related regarding a recent disappearance of five-kopek coins from Moscow. The five-kopek pieces are always in great demand by Muscovites, who need them to pay for subways. Soon after the newly-elected democratic leadership came to power in the capital, a massive shortage of the coins ensued, and no one had an explanation for the shortage. Some time later, a friend of Schekochikin's telephoned him from the city of Kalinin. It seemed that Kalinin, a city with no subway system, had suddenly been inundated with five-kopek pieces, to the extent that,

"People were even receiving their monthly pay in five-kopek coins."

Another anecdote concerned an acquaintance of Schekochikin's in Leningrad. The man was a black marketeer, who ran a little workshop on the edge of Leningrad where people were engaged in manufacturing counterfeit Levis, which were then sold in the Urals for up to 300 rubles. Schekochikin noted that in the West, the only crime this man would have been guilty of was counterfeiting the Levi label. In the Soviet Union, on the other hand, the man's entrepreneurship was responsible for a whole network of corruption. He had to pay bribes to obtain the material. He had to pay bribes to obtain the dye. He had to pay bribes to the local police officer, and then he had to pay another bribe to the police officer so that the police officer's superiors would keep quiet. In the end, more than half the money the black marketeer earns goes toward paying bribes. Schekochikin noted that in the West, organized crime only pays out ten percent of its profits in bribes.

Shoot a Million People

How can the system overcome its inherent contradictions? The answer seems obvious — replace the old ideological values and practices with newer, more pragmatic ones. Unfortunately, this is more easily said than done. The current Soviet debate on whether or not to abolish the death penalty is indicative of the psychology of many Soviets, and how they view current difficulties. In his role as a deputy in the Supreme Soviet, Schekochikin receives many letters from the people in his district. A common suggestion, he noted, was that if only one million people were shot, things would immediately get better. Apparently, reform still has a long way to go.

—Reported by Gordon N. Bardos

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