

Stephen D. Shenfield

Hilary Pilkington, Elena Omel'chenko, and Al'bina Garifzianova. *Russia's Skinheads: Exploring and Rethinking Subcultural Lives*. London: Routledge, 2010. 285 p. ISBN 978-0-4156-3456-4.

Stephen D. Shenfield. Address for correspondence: 145 Colonial Road, Providence, RI 02906, USA. sshenfield@verizon.net.

This book is based on intensive fieldwork conducted in 2006–2007 in the city of Vorkuta in the far-northern Komi Republic, where the three authors—a British sociologist and two colleagues from Russia—got deeply mixed up in the lives of a “friendship group” of young people who called themselves skinheads.

The authors' coordinates are as follows. Hilary Pilkington, currently at the University of Manchester, used to be associated with the Centre for Russian and East European Studies at the University of Birmingham, where I myself was inducted into Soviet Studies in the late 1970s and early 1980s. More to the point, she is one of the best Western specialists in Russian youth subcultures (not excluding the mysterious *gopniki*). Elena Omel'chenko and Al'bina Garifzianova are citizens of Russia and sociologists based at the “Region” Research Centre in Ulyanovsk.

As Hilary Pilkington says in the Conclusion, the book focuses less on the skinheads' racism (“although this [is not] evaded or romanticised”) than on “the beliefs, hopes, joys and pleasures, concerns, fears, hurts and pain that bind and separate them” (224). Above all, the authors are concerned with what it *means* to be a skinhead in Russia. Garifzianova has a chapter on the cultural interests of their informants—music, sport and physical training, hanging out, drugs, drinking, and so on. Other chapters deal with violence and style (both by Pilkington) and with body politics, including tattooing, piercing, and attitudes toward and feelings about the male body, masculinity, and homo/heterosexuality (Omel'chenko).

That is not to say that the traditional subject matter of political science is unduly neglected. Pilkington provides an illuminating chapter on ideology and political engagement, highlighting the tension as well as partial congruence between the two ideological sources that shape the worldview of Russian skinheads—the broad Russian nationalist movement and the more consistently racist transnational skinhead milieu. This tension distinguishes the Russian skinhead movement from its Western counterparts, for while skinheads in all countries define themselves in opposition to “non-whites,” Russian skinheads—to the extent that they are influenced by Russian nationalism and not only by white racism—also define themselves in opposition to the West (or “globalism”).

Pilkington also compares the views of her informants with various general conceptions of fascism, including the one developed in my own study *Russian Fascism: Traditions, Tendencies, Movements* (Shenfield 2001). She finds that the fit is not all that close. In particular, these young people are not sufficiently irrational or backward

looking to count as “real” fascists. I am not sure whether this should be viewed as implicit criticism of scholarly definitions of fascism that are too narrow to encompass skinheads. Another way to resolve the discrepancy is to conclude that skinheads are not in fact fascist—a conclusion especially hard to avoid if the classical Italian fascism of Mussolini (and not Nazism) is taken as the primary historical model.

The choice of Vorkuta as the site of fieldwork is a little problematic. The socially atypical character of Vorkuta as a city in the frozen wastes of the far north is analyzed in depth and clearly has at least some influence on the central research topic, insofar as skinheads in Vorkuta, unlike their fellows further south, feel unable to claim to be indigenous to the area. The indigenes are the Komi and other “small peoples of the North.” Might this not affect the relative weight of Russian nationalism and pan-white racism in skinhead ideology? Skinheads in Vorkuta are perhaps more similar in spirit to Western skinheads, with their relatively “pure” white racism, than skinheads in the Russian heartland, where the traditional Slavophile themes of loyalty to ethnic Russian folkways and closeness to native soil have greater resonance.

The contemporary Russian skinheads presented in this book still resemble, in many respects, the skinheads of the 1990s described in earlier literature (including my book). However, they are clearly somewhat tamer. Although fighting remains a cherished form of entertainment, the police no longer allow them to engage in systematic large-scale violence against their racial, subcultural, and ideological “enemies.” This reflects the broader contrast between the more fluid and multipolar sociopolitical environment of the 1990s and the recentralized Putin regime of the 2000s, which is quite willing to use the violence of “patriotic” vigilantes—but only under its own strict control. Insofar as physical assaults on “enemies” were the *raison d’être* of the skinhead movement, this suggests that as a social force the movement may have declined in recent years, even if its quantitative growth has continued.

As the authors observe, the group under study was first and foremost a group of friends, albeit friends who shared a general ideological orientation. Most members were not very strongly committed to a sharply defined ideology, and one was even attracted to leftist symbols. The “ideologically conscious” member who tried to transform the group into a more disciplined and homogeneous organization under his own leadership encountered such strong resistance that the outcome was the disintegration of the group.

The experience of coauthor Garifzianova is a case in point. Initially rejected as a Tatar and told to go back to Tatarstan where she belonged, she is eventually accepted by the group and even forms a sexual relationship with one of the members—hardly suggestive of a strong attachment to principle on either side.

This minimally ideological character of the skinhead group raises a difficult problem of interpretation. To what extent can the attitudes, feelings, and behavior of the informants be attributed simply to the fact that they constitute a Russian friendship group with given sociological characteristics (age, sex, occupational and educational background)? To what extent can they be attributed specifically to their identity as skinheads? The only way to sort this out would be to conduct a comparative study of several friendship groups belonging to different youth subcultures.

Still, you have to admire the authors' courage. Or is courage the right word for it? There is no indication in the book that it ever dawned on any of them that they might be putting themselves or one another in physical danger. No doubt that is because they were so preoccupied with intellectual issues of a more sophisticated nature. When I was observing Russian nationalists and things seemed to be getting a bit dodgy, and especially if the subject of "the Jews" came up, I would retreat to what I hoped was a safe distance, though still close enough to eavesdrop.

Nevertheless, this is a very informative, insightful, and in places entertaining book, with lots of good photos.

REFERENCES

Shenfield, Stephen D. 2001. *Russian Fascism: Traditions, Tendencies, Movements*. New York: M. E. Sharpe.