

## Nils Schuhmacher

**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.**

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Just like any other “youth culture,” skinheads have come to occupy several meters in the bookshelves of social research. Its results reflect circumstances of time and place—after all, traditions and national characteristics play a major role when it comes to evaluating “the” skinheads, which, in the end, creates an image that is as versatile as it is contradictory. As Pilkington, Omel'chenko, and Garifzianova point out, the term “skinhead” represents a globally observable and established cultural code (and style), which does not, however, have a fixed meaning. Contrary to this is the finding that, in many countries such as Russia, the United States (Hamm 1993), and for a long time Germany (Möller and Schuhmacher 2007), skinhead culture possesses an explicit political outline and that it functions as a kind of aesthetic cloak for racism and violence.

As the authors describe in their introduction, such images and stereotypes perpetuated by the media “affected” Russian skinhead culture right from the start. Russian skinhead culture emerged in the early 1990s and thus developed relatively late. Scientific observers have long been regarding it as a social basis for extreme right-wing organization and as a central player in a violence that, in comparison with the rest of Europe, manifests itself as massively racist. What is specific about it is not only its dimension (there are an estimated 75,000 to 100,000 skinheads living in Russia, not all of whom are right-wing). The fact that they are comparatively well organized, that their right-wing oriented contents are comparatively strongly ideologized, and that a stylistic-aesthetic purism appears to be of comparatively little importance makes it harder to categorize them according to the terms of youth culture.

This creates the idea of Russian skinheads as a political movement or a politicized subculture. The authors of this ethnographic study, which was compiled between 2002–2003 and 2006–2007, dissociate themselves from this perception. More modestly, they want to know what skinhead affiliation and group identity mean to the members. Beyond spectacular practices and merely looking at a small detail of Russian skinhead culture, they aim to answer these questions by presenting a thick description of the skinhead scene in Vorkuta as an example. They do this by means of interviews and participant observations.

## STRUCTURE AND THEORETICAL APPROACH

The study is structured according to this approach of “exploring everyday lives.” The authors introduce their study with a description of the city Vorkuta. In a socio-spatial and sociohistoric way, the authors describe the city as an “extreme place” which forms strong bonds between them even before their collective (youth) cultural identification as skinheads. What follows are paragraphs about the subjective meaning of being a skinhead, about ideological positionings and the political dimensions of group identity, about personal violence, about the performative side of skinhead affiliation and its bodily and gender-specific aspects.

This structure of presenting the study is based upon theoretical considerations, distinguishing it from the black-and-white schema of large parts of current debates about youth cultures. The authors attempt to find a way between the “classic”—from an Anglo-American point of view—subcultural perspective of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) and postsubcultural approaches. This is done on two levels. Firstly, in differentiation from strictly socio-structural interpretations, they share with postsubcultural approaches the insight that an understanding of (youth) cultural collectivization in its core succeeds through the reconstruction of the importance which is attributed to it by its affiliated members. In differentiation from individualizing approaches they simultaneously insist on the relevance of relationships between microcultural practices and socio-structural foundations and conditions. Secondly, they highlight micropractices of identity as a process in relation to the increasing impossibility to distinguish “subculture” from “mainstream” and “youth culture” from “parental culture.” At the same time, they do not hide the fact that the Birmingham School had already put a central focus on the close mutual bonds between media and everyday cultural group formations and that they, on the basis of a procedural culture definition, by no means assumed rigid cultural groupings.

Building on this double perspective, they examine cultural practices and affective bonds beyond what is spectacular—in embodied communications and communicative practices of everyday life—and connect these practices with socio-structural foundations. Here, the authors use the “youth cultural strategy” concept in order to describe how youths negotiate the interaction of different cultural regimes that are based upon gender, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity, and thus subdue cultural option spaces. The concept of style is of particular importance in this context. Style (and here too, references to works of the CCCS are recognizable) is not just perceived as “the mere husk, the wrapping, the sugar-coating on the pill” (Hall 1996:473) but as a term which—divided into visual style and performative style—combines myths, symbols, rituals, and acts of everyday communications. The concept remains geared towards the labeling approach and thus does not lose sight of the fact that processes of affiliation and self-description always correspond with the descriptions of others and interactions with them.

## CENTRAL RESULTS AND REMAINING QUESTIONS

All in all, the authors of this easy to read study manage to paint an extremely differentiated picture, and this is in the light of the fact that they only examined a very small detail of this culture, which should also be understood as a strong hint towards the potentials of ethnographic research. From amongst the very well summarized results, the following appear significant for the debate about “deviant” groups:

- Group cohesion largely relies on local experiences. This means it is not solely and primarily (youth) cultural correlations that define the stability of such skinhead groups.
- Group affiliation is negotiated in the context of widely applied strategies. This means what is important for the understanding of these groups and/or their members are not only processes of collective “equalization” but individual decisions.
- The connection of supremacy and enmity apparent in these groups is not solely based upon individual adaptation efforts to the rules of the group but strongly corresponds with the assertion of individuality within the group and the orientation along hegemonic values and attitudes which lie beyond the borders of these groups.
- The violence of the group links archaic and modern elements. Their violent acts are thus to be interpreted not just as an expression of opposition (or individual deficits) but also as a specific adaptation effort to prevailing norms of assertion and discourses of inequality.

At the same time, these results invite the reader to ask one or two questions: In general, it should be discussed what kinds of analytical gains are achieved if, as is done by the authors, the term “skinhead life” is used to replace not only the term subculture but also the term (youth) culture. After all, a term as broad as “life” fails to capture the specifics and temporary validity of cultural and social classification. Furthermore, the question of whether a class-theory oriented interpretation might not be worthwhile could be asked with particular regard to the special situation in Russia (or, more generally, in the postsocialist world). In the end—and this is the core of the global code—Russian skinhead culture mobilizes precisely the skills of a lost, nominally proletarian industrial society and places them and their importance before youth cultural aspects.

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