

Mischa Gabowitsch

Friends in the City? Research Routes after *Russia's Skinheads*

Mischa Gabowitsch. Address for correspondence: Einstein Forum, Am Neuen Markt 7, 14467 Potsdam, Germany. mischa.gabowitsch@einsteinforum.de.

The editors of *Laboratorium* have asked me to comment on the six very different reviews of Hilary Pilkington, Elena Omel'chenko, and Al'bina Garifzianova's *Russia's Skinheads: Exploring and Rethinking Subcultural Lives* they have assembled (for my own review of the book, see Gabowitsch, forthcoming).

Let me start by congratulating *Laboratorium* on organizing this debate. Foreign-language works on Russia still far too often go virtually unnoticed, and certainly underdiscussed, in Russian-language academia outside the authors' own network of friends and colleagues. More often than not, even the best studies fail to make an impact on understandings of Russia in Russia itself, and the authors are left without feedback from those who know their field best, giving many discussions of such studies (in Western journals) an excessively theoretical slant. Journals such as *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, *Ab Imperio*, and *Antropologicheskii forum* have done much to remedy this for literary/cultural studies, history, and anthropology respectively, and it is good to see that things are beginning to change in sociology, too.

The literature on radical nationalism in post-Soviet Russia is a case in point. While there has been a steady trickle of solidly researched books on various aspects of that topic in French, English, and German, not to mention the increasingly sophisticated literature in Russian best summarized here by Victor Shnirelman, for a long time the non-Russian works in particular remained largely isolated from any sustained scholarly debate. Despite valiant curatorial efforts by author-editors such as Marlène Laruelle, Andreas Umland, and Aleksandr Verkhovskii, what little debate there was tended to be focused on a rather narrow set of questions defined by a particularly normative variety of political science: is Russian nationalism a threat (to democracy, the West, Jews, Muslims, etc.), is it fascist, and could it take over the state or parts of it? As Dmitry Dubrovsky points out, much of this discussion has been based on discourse analysis; I would add that even the other topic he mentions, namely political violence, was underresearched until recent years compared with the stream of publications whose sole empirical evidence consisted of opinion polls and published ideological texts or newspaper reports.

Pilkington, Omel'chenko, and Garifzianova's study and the debate it has generated are especially important in that they allow us to view the reality of skinheads' lives with a broader lens than that imposed by the restrictive questions of the normative, moral panic approach. Thus what is remarkable about the debate is the sheer variety of comments, critiques, and suggestions for further study that *Russia's Skinheads* has generated. This opens up avenues of further research that I will summarize, selectively,

under three headings: urban ethnography, youth scenes and friendship groups, and the question of authenticity.

URBAN ETHNOGRAPHY

Sofia Tchouikina and Oksana Zaporozhets in particular point out the value of the book as an example of urban ethnography that paints a striking picture of Vorkuta as a “survival city.” Zaporozhets applauds the reversal of geographic and even cartographic perspective that the authors undertake (which made me realize how surprising it is that the book does not include maps, either of the town as a whole or of the skinheads’ neighborhood and everyday routes). She even goes so far as to claim that “Vorkuta is one of the book’s main protagonists.” Yet she goes on to stress two effects of life in Vorkuta that appear particularly salient from an outsider’s perspective: the limitations it imposes on the imagination and expectations of its residents, and its geographic distance from Moscow. Just as the “we” in Tchouikina’s description of Vorkuta as a “symbolic city whose contemporary reality we know next to nothing about,” this point of view implicitly assumes that relevant knowledge about Russia accumulates in a small number of big Russian cities as well as the West. Local communities are most saliently defined by their perspective on the outside world and in particular by their relations with, and distance from, Moscow. Residents of the periphery are objects to be studied, and we need general concepts such as “survival city” to impose some kind of homogeneous legibility on the messy yet repetitive local reality of provincial Russia. The “we” of the international scholarly community and the “we” of the local residents, especially unappetizing ones such as violent skinheads, are irrevocably opposed to each other.

This attitude, which has its roots in what Alexander Etkind (2011) has termed Russia’s “internal colonization” and, more generally, in the sociological perspective as such, is so ingrained in all of *us* (since I can hardly extricate myself from the first of these two *we*’s) that we find it hard to imagine an alternative. The beauty of Pilkington, Omel’chenko, and Garifzianova’s book is that it makes a serious attempt to highlight the tensions and hierarchical effects that this approach generates and, in particular, the informants’ resistance to being turned into mere objects of description, something many of us regularly encounter as part of our fieldwork experience.

There have been other attempts to involve residents of provincial Russia into sociological research about themselves. One that comes to mind is the “Baikal Siberia” project at the Irkutsk-based Centre for Independent Social Research and Education (Rozhanskii 2002; Diatlov, Panarin, and Rozhanskii 2005), which, in addition to contributions by professional researchers, included ethnological observations by “regular” residents of towns in the Baikal region. Still, reflecting upon such hierarchical effects has not yet become standard practice. This, surely, is one research avenue that needs to be developed further. In particular, we need even more detailed urban ethnographies of Russian cities beyond Moscow and Saint Petersburg that would provide rich accounts of the ways in which urban space—rather than just remoteness—structures the life worlds of local residents and of how this differs for

different types of residents. At the same time, the privileges of the outsider's perspective should not be jettisoned: thus, Tchouikina is right to point out the strange absence of discussion of Vorkuta's Gulag past among the authors' respondents. One needs to be an outsider to realize how problematic this is.

YOUTH SCENES AND FRIENDSHIP GROUPS

To my mind, Victor Shnirelman's thorough, detailed, and gracious critique of Pilkington, Omel'chenko, and Garifzianova's book is central to the entire debate in that he brings into very clear relief the book's value and limitations *as a study of Russian skinheads*. He goes to great lengths to contextualize the study from the point of view of the dynamics of youth skinhead groups across Russia in recent years. In order to understand the Vorkuta group's position among neo-Nazi skinheads in Russia and their value for a general understanding of that scene, we would need many more case studies to follow up on the authors' pioneering fieldwork—although, if Shnirelman's point about the scene's decline and transformation proves to have lasting validity, it may be too late to capture the high point of skinhead activity in Russia using such methods.

However, as several reviewers point out, Pilkington, Omel'chenko, and Garifzianova's book is valuable not just as a study of skinheads but as a study of friendship groups in general, casting light on what is arguably the most important type of social bond in contemporary Russia and certainly for young people between teen age and parenthood. The ideological fluidity, fluctuations, and transformations over time observed in this group will sound familiar to anyone who has done research on such groups in any mid-sized Russian city. One of the highlights in my own collection was a group in Yaroslavl' that, over the space of a few years, jointly graduated from occultism to Trotskyism. Thus I agree entirely with Stephen Shenfield, who asks:

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.

The more general point here may be that in Russia, the link between supposedly objective social characteristics and political views appears to be particularly tenuous. This has been borne out most recently by a number of studies comparing participants in pro- and anti-Putin demonstrations in Moscow, which have shown that the two groups often differ from each other almost exclusively in their attitude toward Putin and United Russia (Soboleva 2013).

To Shenfield's valuable suggestion I would add, perhaps, that in order to avoid bias, the selection of friendship groups for a comparative study should not be based on ideological criteria alone but should take into account other factors that could influence group dynamics. In particular, the research design should take into account

the tensions between local context, group dynamics, and subcultural effects that Nils Schuhmacher discusses in his review. If Pilkington, Omel'chenko, and Garifzianova's book stimulated the kind of complex collective project that would be necessary to carry out such a study, it would have done another great service to sociological research on Russia.

AUTHENTICITY

This brings me to my final point, authenticity. Implicit in debates about friendship groups versus ideological communities is a dilemma that has dogged studies of youth subcultures in Russia. To what extent should we take their—often shifting and sometimes inconsistent—ideological pronouncements seriously, and to what extent should we view them as gangs that adopt ideological markers simply to differentiate themselves from others and enhance their sense of self-importance? In other words, in looking at subcultures such as Nazi skinheads, SHARP football hooligans, or DIY punks, are we dealing with movements or gangs—or something in between, and in that case, what? Of course it would be wrong to apply an external yardstick of authenticity to determine whether a group of self-styled skinheads are real skinheads—this point, stressed by both the authors and by Martin Heřmanský in his review, seems banal but remains extremely important to underline. (Earlier this year I took part in a debate where a senior historian earnestly suggested that late Soviet and post-Soviet anarchists, unlike their late Imperial predecessors, were not “real” anarchists because they had not read Bakunin—even though of course many of them had, and his reasoning would have been obviously flawed even if they had not.)

But Heřmanský's other point—that authenticity is crucial as an emic criterion of street cred—is no less important. Heřmanský argues that the concept of “cultural strategy” allows the authors to turn their focus from subcultures taken as wholes to individual lives and thus take into account both structural constraints and individual agency. But his own reminder of the importance of authenticity—or, in other words, autobiographical coherence—for the individuals concerned suggests that the notion of “strategy” might not be sufficient here. The term “strategy” has become so ubiquitous in Russian qualitative sociology that it is used almost unthinkingly, but it has its roots in a very specific kind of sociological thinking, best expressed in the works of Pierre Bourdieu. I would argue that this school of thought has failed to resolve the tension between structure and agency, among other reasons, because it does not provide a satisfactory account of what is “strategic” about what it calls “strategy.” Regarding the topic at hand, what exactly are the moments and places when and where the Vorkuta skinheads' thinking and behavior are “strategic”? Is their subcultural behavior perhaps more strategic than their actions in other contexts?

What we need here, I would suggest, is a pragmatic and situational approach that specifies how subcultural agents locate and articulate authenticity in different settings: ideological pronouncements, everyday relations within the friendship group, behavior toward those encountered as representatives of other, sometimes

hostile subcultures, and settings that are outside the subcultural scene altogether (family relations, the workplace, etc.).

The kind of comparative study of friendship groups that Shenfield suggests should take this complex architecture of authenticity into account and could draw on studies already done in Russia that are inspired by the work of Laurent Thévenot, as well as analyses of friendship ties published by Oleg Kharkhordin and his colleagues (e.g., Kharkhordin 2009). *Russia's Skinheads* is bound to become an important building block in this kind of research program, not least because it follows its subjects through such a variety of settings and takes them seriously in each one.

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