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The Evolution of the Thieves’ Code: An Analysis of Russian Criminal Tattoos

Russian criminal tattoos serve not only to display a convict’s criminal record, but also to establish and enforce the social hierarchy of the criminal world. The placement and imagery of each tattoo is anything but accidental; tattoos are a form of visual language understood only by criminals, law enforcement, and experienced researchers. The meanings of criminal tattoos have been thoroughly studied and documented by researchers such as Danzig Baldaev, and some work has been done on the current state of the criminal tattoo code in Russia. The collapse of the Soviet Union radically destabilized the traditional hierarchies of the Russian criminal world; this destabilization, in turn, has affected the “language” of criminal tattoos. For instance, whereas during the Soviet period, a вор в законе [vor v zakone] (thief in law), or legitimate thief, earned his marks of honor—a star on each shoulder and knee—by committing the crimes depicted by the tattoos on his body, an aspiring criminal can now simply buy these tattoos and by doing so secure a position of authority in the criminal hierarchy. In this paper I will analyze the “language” of tattoos in the context of the Soviet criminal underworld, and then proceed to discuss the transformation of the underworld and its code after 1991, paying particular attention to the effects of these changes on the tattoos themselves. I will also discuss the consequences of post-Soviet paradigm shifts for the criminal world and for law enforcement.

Before identifying and analyzing particular tattoos, it is essential to address the history behind the Russian воровской мир [vorovskoi mir] (criminal world), in particular the professional criminal society that emerged in Soviet prison and labor camps. Several key distinctions existed between professional criminals and the political prisoners that were exiled to
distant labor camps under the charge of being “enemies of the people.” Professional criminals were placed in prison for committing serious crimes such as robbery, murder, or rape, while political prisoners were accused of betraying the Soviet people. This difference was outwardly visible by the fact that professional criminals wore expressive and symbolic tattoos while political prisoners did not. Political prisoners were not members of the world of thieves, which had its own established set of rules and customs that legitimate thieves adhered to with extreme discipline. In fact, it can be argued that the laws of the professional criminal world, especially in prison, were followed more strictly than in the Soviet civil world. For example, a true vor v zakone was forbidden to perform civil work outside his profession as a thief, to cooperate with any form of state or prison authority, including the менты [menty] (the fuzz), or to steal from a fellow thief. Any thief who diverted from the code faced severe punishment, including being stripped of his rank or even killed. According to Efrat Shoham, the strict laws of the criminal world were represented and enforced by a convict’s tattoos, which “described the nature of the criminal offense, the prisoner’s worldview, and the prisoner’s position in the criminal world.”

Tattoos effectively established and enforced an authoritative social hierarchy in prison, and in reality, the head thieves, or паханы [pakhan], often possessed more power over the prisoners than the administration.

Pakhany and legitimate vorы v zakone rarely committed crime themselves. Instead they relegated the work to lower thieves and convicts (known as зеки [zeki]). Because of this hierarchal structure, “the concept of a ‘suit’ or масть [mast’], meaning ‘clan’ or ‘caste,’ is central to thieves’ jargon.” According to Alexei Plutser-Sarno, in his introduction to the Encyclopedia

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1 Shoham, 990.
2 Plutser-Sarno, Encyclopedia Volume I, 41.
of Russian Criminal Tattoos: Volume 1, a suit can variously refer to “the entire class of thieves, a group of thieves, a community of thieves with a particular specialty or that specialty itself, and a thief’s fate, happiness and luck.” If a certain pakhan ‘holds the suit,’ he effectively holds power over the community of thieves, controls them, and maintains order and the observance of the law of thieves. According to Danzig Baldaev in his illustrative book Drawings from the Gulag, there were three main suits of criminals:

After the Presidium of the Supreme Council decree of 6th July 1947, three large ‘suits’ (groups) of criminals were formed: thieves, ‘bitches’, and muzhiks. The second echelon of power of the Gulag, underneath the administration, were the thieves and ‘bitches’, who oppressed the muzhiks. The ‘enemies of the people’ shared the fate of the muzhiks.

The term ‘muzhik’ (peasant) refers to low-ranking thieves who, together with political prisoners, were forced to perform the most grueling and demanding work at the camps. Muzhiki would take on the work of pakhany, who never worked, in order to receive protection from these high-ranking thieves.

In addition to these specific castes, the prison society of professional criminals was divided from the outset into two camps: the Blacks and the Reds. The Blacks, who were also called negatives or Blatnye (blacks), were hardened criminals who strongly opposed authority and whom the authorities could never crack. Vory v zakone would only be associated with the Blacks, since they were the most respected prisoners. According to Alix Lambert, in her book Russian Prison Tattoos, members of the other camp, the Reds, assisted the prison administration. Naturally conflicts arose between the two groups. The most brutal

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3 Plutser-Sarno, Encyclopedia Volume I, 43.
4 Ibid.
5 Baldaev, 77.
6 Lambert, 16.
confrontations, however, occurred between convicts and political prisoners. Prison authorities would not assist political prisoners in such situations, which frequently resulted in political prisoners losing personal possessions or even their lives. Baldaev notes that “robbing ‘enemies of the people’ of their clothes, rations and parcels by criminals in the Gulag was commonplace.”

This was often the result of thieves’ gambling, who would wager political prisoner’s possessions when they ran out of items of their own to stake. Since the prison administration turned a blind eye to such activity, the political prisoners had no recourse. Moreover, theft was the least severe of repercussions against political prisoners, because convicts would also torture and brutally murder “enemies of the people.” Baldaev explains that convicts “electrocuted, stabbed, hanged and decapitated [the political prisoners], inserted red-hot crowbars into the anus, etc.”

Professional criminals in the Soviet labor camps tended to not fear further punishment for murders committed in prison, since they had no future waiting for them outside the camp walls. As demonstrated by the violent treatment of political prisoners, the criminal subculture in Soviet labor camps was characterized by “manifestations of machismo, domination, defiance, rebellion and an open antagonism toward the Establishment and its representatives.”

The criminal community in and out of the prison camps preserved and reinforced the loyalty and commitment of its members, who were dedicated to the criminal lifestyle. Once incarcerated, convicts would completely lose their previous civil life, which then created a sense of death—an important motif in prison tattoos. In order to become a vor v zakone, an aspiring thief had to die twice—“first by abandoning the ‘world of juveniles’ and second by leaving

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7 Baldaev, 128.
8 Ibid., 140.
9 Shoham, 1000.
10 Ibid.
behind the ‘world of will.’”¹¹ When a young man or woman became a thief, he or she would have to completely submit to the vorovskoi mir in a manner that deprived them of personal will. Since tattoos can significantly alter the appearance of a human body, an aspiring thief would thereby sacrifice his physical body and soul to the world of thieves. This utter devotion to the criminal society meant that a thief had to reject his familial ties. Plutser-Sarno, in an essay from the second volume of the Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopedia, writes the following about the relationship between death and prison for thieves: "A true thief, therefore, is both born in prison and dies there. Visiting this symbolic grave [of prison] is an important stage in the life of every thief."¹² In this light, prison was an ideal location for a legitimate thief, while the thought of incarceration would have deeply frightened an average citizen.

A criminal is initiated into the world of thieves by committing a crime and receiving the corresponding tattoo, which is “called a реклама [reklama] (advert), регалка [regalka] (regalia), расписка [raspiska] (painting) or клеймо [kleimo] (brand).”¹³ Thus, tattoos embody a criminal’s “service record,” and serve as a criminal’s identity card.¹⁴ Fellow convicts, therefore, cannot trust a criminal without tattoos. In the thieves’ argot such a man is known as a петушок [petushok] (cockerel), and in a prison camp he immediately acquires the status of a чухан [chukhan] (stooge).¹⁵ These convicts are also referred to as ‘gray men,’¹⁶ who do not fit into the symbolic world of thieves. Since many convicts are repeat offenders, their personal identity card can be quite elaborate. Such a criminal’s body would be covered in tattoos, making him a

¹² Plutser-Sarno, Encyclopedia Volume II, 45.
¹³ Ibid., 31.
¹⁴ Ibid., 27.
¹⁵ Ibid.
¹⁶ Lambert, 34.
complex key to the language of the criminal world. Shoham believes that tattoos are essential for convicts, since they provide a “sense of belonging, protection, and security crucial for survival in prison.”\textsuperscript{17} He adds that “they serve to punish, denounce, and exclude those associated with the normative world,”\textsuperscript{18} who are labeled фраера fraera (outsiders). This important function of inmates’ tattoos originated in the Soviet labor camps, where conditions were unbearable. Fearing the wrath of other inmates or the brutal living conditions of the isolated labor camp, inmates strove for unity in order to make sense of their reality.

Staying true to the strict criminal code, convicts must honorably earn their tattoos by committing the crime that is represented through a particular tattoo. Ranking thieves usually decide which tattoo is appropriate for a certain inmate. In prison camps, a criminal with a misappropriated tattoo is severely punished, often by death or the forceful removal of the tattoo with a knife or other available tools. Plutser-Sarno asserts that “the tattoos [therefore] play the part of a generator of social behaviour, structuring the life of the entire society of thieves.”\textsuperscript{19} If a ranking thief breaks the code, his tattoos of authority are removed, and this shame is considered worse than death. Perhaps even more shameful than the removal of a tattoo is being forced to tattoo an image on one’s forehead, since it is such a visible space on the body. The most severe punishments in prison for the misappropriation of a tattoo occurred during Soviet times. Now many inmates manage to tattoo whatever they please on their skin; however, the threat of punishment remains, especially if there are still older thieves that are more loyal to the code in a particular prison camp.

\textsuperscript{17} Shoham, 1000.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{19} Plutser-Sarno, Encyclopedia Volume I, 41.
Since tattoos are often quite complex and symbolically intertwined, the meaning of many tattoos cannot be determined at first glance; as Shohan points out, “it is only the combination of the parts that creates the real meaning of the tattooed image.”\(^{20}\) In the words of Plutser-Sarno, “the meaning of Russian convict tattoos is thus determined in a rather complex manner at the interface of linguistic, visual, social, communicative, and psychological contexts.”\(^{21}\) A thorough understanding of particular tattoos, therefore, requires a close familiarity with thieves’ jargon, culture, and values. For example, a tattooed image of a Russian Orthodox church with onion domes does not indicate that the bearer has a strong religious affiliation. Instead, the number of cupolas on the church represents the number of trips through the ‘zone’ (prison system) or years served by that particular criminal. These tattoos can typically be found on a criminal’s back or chest and tend to be quite large illustrations. Similarly, ring tattoos on the fingers can also represent the number of sentences given. Criminal tattoos are for the most part apolitical; a tattoo with a political image merely conveys the anti-authoritarian ideal of the criminal world. According to Plutser-Sarno, tattoos that parodied popular Soviet propaganda, therefore, were essentially were visual opposition to the camp administration and Soviet authority.\(^{22}\) In the Soviet prison camps, a tattooed image of Stalin or Lenin served an additional purpose; many convicts tattooed the faces of these leaders (often together) on their chests to prevent being executed by a firing squad, as it was believed that the Soviet authorities would not dare put a bullet through the face of either leader. Additionally, “the common image of Lenin is also a concealed acronym for VOR (thief), since the Russian word is made up of the first letters of the

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\(^{20}\) Shoham, 991.
\(^{22}\) Ibid., 37.
words ‘Leader of the October Revolution.’” Without knowing the true meaning of this tattooed acronym, the message it conveys could be easily misconstrued.

As is the case with images of Lenin, other acronyms tattooed on convicts’ bodies also often stand for something completely unrelated to the actual word. For example, Plutser-Sarno notes that “the letters of the Russian word боа [bog] (God) stand for “I shall rob again” and the word жук [zhuk] (beetle) stands for “I wish you successful robbing.” A popular hand tattoo reads СЛООН [slon] (elephant), which actually stands for “from my early years nothing but misery.” It is also important to mention that tattoos on various parts of the body represent different things. For example, Plutser-Sarno writes the following:

Signs on the chest are more serious and carry more status. Most often these are stars with between seven and sixteen points, with skulls, heads of cats, lions, devils or wolves, crosses, candles, crowns, daggers, double-headed eagles, wings, the sign of the suit of spades or clubs and several other central thieves’ symbols. Rings round the fingers express a thief’s precise caste or professional identity.

This indicates that the variety of criminal tattoos is expansive, thus making it more difficult to decipher the language.

Before analyzing particular tattoos in more detail, it is worth discussing how tattoos are made in prison, where convicts must utilize crude and unsanitary materials to apply the tattoos onto their bodies. First of all, tattooing in prison is strictly forbidden, so convicts must work in secret. There typically is a designated tattoo artist, whose services are “purchased” with bartered items. In her introduction to the second volume of the Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopedia, Anne Applebaum writes that, during the Soviet era, “professional artists who wound up in the

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23 Ibid., 39.
24 Ibid., 29.
26 Ibid., 43.
camps often found themselves ‘employed,’ drawing tattoos in exchange for bread.”27 In thieves’
jargon they are known as кольшики [kol ’shiki] (prickers) or, more accurately, “zone prickers.”28
Plutser-Sarno notes that “people who are experienced in ‘reading’ and making tattoos acquire
additional status in the world of thieves.”29 These tattoo artists naturally become more valued in
the prison system, since they are the only ones who can skillfully make tattoos that correspond to
the thieves’ code. The favored tattooing device is a wind-up razor, which can be found in most
prisons. The argot names for such a razor include машинка [mashinka] (typewriter), бормашина
[bormashina] (dentist’s drill), and швейная машина [shveinaia mashina] (sewing machine).”30
Lambert describes how needles are typically formed from a “guitar string sharpened on the
striking edge of a matchbox,” which is then “threaded through a regulation wind up shaver.”31
These substitute needles are called “peshnia (ice pick), пчёлка (bee), шпора (spur) or жало
(sting).”32 Additionally, “a grafted-on pen cap serves as the ink well.”33 The ink, which is often
called мазут [mazut] (fuel oil) or грязь [griaz’] (dirt), is produced within prison walls in a
dangerous and unsanitary fashion. It is fitting that one of the argot names for ink is griaz’, since
it usually consists of a mixture of soot and urine. Many convicts burn the heel of boots to create a
black powder which is then “sifted through a handkerchief and combined with a few parts urine
to produce a durable ink.”34 Plutser-Sarno adds that “mazut also means the most valuable food
products in the prison camp zone: tea, fat and jam, [so] the pigment is thus equated with the

27 Applebaum, 21.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
31 Lambert, 17.
33 Lambert, 17.
34 Lambert, 17.
zone’s highest material values.”\textsuperscript{35} This makeshift ink is poured into a pen cap, and the “shaver is wound so that the guitar string moves like a sewing machine needle through the ink and into the flesh.”\textsuperscript{36} For a typical tattoo, this process can take between one to seven hours to complete. Due to unsanitary conditions, the process of creating tattoos often leads to infections and other health complications.

When a wind-up razor is unavailable, tattoo artists can apply tattoos in an even cruder fashion. One process includes the use of two thin needles tied together with string so that one is slightly higher than the other. The artist dips the needles in ink does the tattoo by hand.\textsuperscript{37} In order to make less intricate tattoos, prisoners can use a special kind of board with needles sticking out of it in a pattern or drawing, which are then dipped in ink. Instead of piercing the skin with one needle, the prisoner pierces his skin with the entire board, which produces a more immediate result. As one can imagine, all of these processes are very painful and many prisoners cannot complete the tattoo in one sitting due to extreme discomfort. Lambert provides research showing that “sixty to seventy percent of the convicts received their tattoos in the pretrial isolation cells and the general regime prisons.”\textsuperscript{38} The needles and ink necessary to make tattoos, however, are more accessible in the prison camps than in the detention cells.

Another aspect of prison tattoos is the significance of particular tattoos, which distinguish the different suits of the prison hierarchy. One of the most important categories of tattoos for this analysis expresses authority. A common image of authority is a skull, which is also a “symbol of

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 39
\textsuperscript{38} Lambert, 53.
death, and a man’s specific rank as a thief.’”\(^{39}\) Plutser-Sarno adds that, “the symbols of authoritative ‘legitimate thieves’ also include several animals—a cat, a panther, a lion, a leopard, a tiger, a snake and an eagle.”\(^{40}\) Another widely recognized symbol of authority is an eight-pointed star on each shoulder and knee. These were accurately depicted and described in David Cronenberg’s 2007 film *Eastern Promises*, which portrays Russian mafia activity in London. Although the film takes place outside of prison, the tattoos of Nikolai Luzhin (played by Viggo Mortensen) are evidence of his time spent in Russian prisons. The tattoo of an eight pointed star on a thief’s knee means that he will not kneel before anyone, especially authority. In addition to the images of a skull or stars, another popular sign of authority is an image of a crucifix (often with Christ included), which can also include a crown over it. According to Plutser-Sarno, this crown suggests that the criminal is a “king of thieves.”\(^{41}\) A *pakhan* wears this particular tattoo, while his lieutenant enforcers wear tattoos of daggers. Thieves of varying rank—ranging from lieutenant, captain, major, colonel, and general to admiral—often tattoo an epaulette on their shoulder, resembling a similar symbol of authority worn by military officers.

The next criminal category essential for discussion is that of thieves. Plutser-Sarno writes that “the main symbol of a ‘legitimate thief’ is the suit of clubs or spades, and the most ‘noble’ cards in the deck are the kings of clubs and of spades.”\(^{42}\) One of the most prominent tattoos worn by thieves is that of a cat, which symbolizes “agility and a thief’s luck.”\(^{43}\) There are various images of cats worn by thieves and all of them possess subtle variations in meaning. For example, many thieves wear the image of a predator cat, perhaps similar to a jaguar or panther.

\(^{40}\) Ibid., 43.
\(^{41}\) Ibid.
\(^{42}\) Plutser-Sarno, *Encyclopedia Volume 1*, 43.
\(^{43}\) Ibid.
Lambert writes that, “the image of a predator on the chest means, as a rule, a sentence for a grave crime such as robbery. It shows that the person can stand up for themselves.” Usually it is thieves of rank who have the right to wear this particular tattoo. Wings, likewise representative of agility, are also basic signs of a thief. Plutser-Sarno adds that “a ‘pen’ (knife), sword, dagger and grinning ‘beast’ are symbols of a thief’s power, strength and ruthless attitude to enemies of the world of thieves.” The tattooed image of a spider in a web depicts a thief’s attitude toward his participation in the world of thieves, conveying that the wearer is walking along a criminal path. The placement of the spider on the body contains a significance of its own, as Lambert explains:

> When on the skull, it says ‘I am a convict until the very end.’ A spider in a web means that the Zone is woven into everything and that the wearer is the boss. A spider climbing upward means he is continuing to live the criminal life. Downwards the wearer wants to end that life.

Another variation of the spider tattoo is one of an upward crawling spider on the shoulder, which “means that I am marching in step, that I observe the tradition of the Thieves.” Identifying the variations of the spider tattoo is vital for law enforcement, as it is a direct clue to the criminal ambitions of a particular convict.

Tattoos that identify killers are also very important to understand, because of the severity of the crimes they represent. The tattoo most widely used by killers is one that depicts a dagger or knife. Shoham explains that hired killers, who cannot refuse a request by a fellow criminal to kill another individual, exclusively wear an image of a knife dripping blood.

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44 Lambert, 128.
46 Lambert, 27.
47 Ibid., 129.
48 Shoham, 995.
A retired police colonel who worked for thirty years as a criminal investigator, claims that “if the tattoo shows a dagger tearing through skin and leaving drops of blood, it means that you can always ask for this person’s help to kill somebody if your hands are shaky.” Naturally, the tattoo of an executioner can also be a mark of a killer.

Unlike the straightforward symbolism of killers’ tattoos, pornographic tattoos are often misunderstood to be solely connected with sex and vulgarity. Plutser-Sarno writes such tattoos are “in fact only indirectly related to eroticism;” instead, they serve to punish convicts who have failed to follow the code. For example, “images of copulation are tattooed on the body of a thief who fails to pay his debts at cards” and these tattoos symbolically equate this thief with a prostitute. This comparison casts severe shame on the loser at cards, since the word bliad ’ (whore) is one of the worst possible insults in the world of thieves. For this reason, these erotic tattoos are not meant to arouse fellow inmates, but rather to incite fear in them. Any association with such an inmate would mean social death. On the other hand, tattoos that actually convey an erotic meaning do not appear to do so at first glance. In Plutser-Sarno’s words, “such a tattoo might simply be an image of a crown with the suit of hearts.” These less obvious tattoos simply assign their wearer a sexual role within the criminal society; the wearer transfers from the male role to the female one. In effect, these erotic tattoos reflect the violent sexual relationships that form between inmates. Plutser-Sarno writes the following: “Manifestations of sexuality and a

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49 As cited in Lambert, 21.
50 Plutser-Sarno, Encyclopedia Volume I, 45.
51 Ibid., 47.
52 Ibid.
serious attitude to love are not encouraged in the world of thieves.” If a convict becomes preoccupied with sex, his social status lowers, and he cannot hold any authority over thieves.

Although the majority of convicts wearing tattoos are male, many women also live by the thieves’ code and tattoo symbolic images on their bodies. The Moscow Center for Prison Reform reported that as of January 1, 2003 out of Russia’s 877,000 inmates, 50,000 were women. Many female inmates have the same reputation as males for ruthlessness, especially in the Soviet labor camps. In *Drawings from the Gulag*, Baldaev illustrates numerous scenes of female convicts beating and killing female political prisoners:

The Gulag witnessed the most extreme forms of beating, sadism, murder and savage racial antagonism. *Makhanshas* (female ‘legitimate’ thieves), and *zhuchkas* (their accomplices), were the highest, most privileged caste in women’s prison camps.

Not only do female thieves wield power in the prison camps, but female legitimate thieves can also receive many of the same authoritative tattoos as males, such as the eight-pointed star on each shoulder and knee. However, a lower overall percentage of female convicts receive prison tattoos.

All of the previously mentioned tattoos provide a symbolic representation of the strict thieves’ code, and each one serves the important purpose of enforcing that code. The thieves’ code, however, has been constantly changing and losing influence since the later years of the Soviet Union, and especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. A considerable threat to the code even appeared as early as the 1950s, when convicts who had fought for the Soviet Union in the Second World War returned from military service. Since legitimate thieves

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53 Ibid.
54 Moscow Center for Prison Reform, “Latest Prison Statistics.”
55 Baldaev, 129.
were forbidden from cooperating with state authority, the returning veterans were highly criticized by the convicts who refused to serve their country. An internal prison war erupted between the “bitches” (convicts returning from military service) and the legitimate thieves who strictly adhered to their own code. The camp’s polarity caused bloody conflict between the two camps, while also showing that there was a difference in opinion within the world of thieves. In this light, Josiah McConnell Heyman, in his book *States and Illegal Practices*, writes that “for many criminals, the Thieves’ law was not a supreme value.”

Likewise, prison tattoos have represented the changing values of the thieves’ code, whether it was “from the soaring eagles of the 1920s to the Lenin and Stalin tattoos beginning with the rise of Communism and continuing into the 40s and 50s to the various demons and drug tattoos of today.”

The changing values of the code reflect the generational gap between convicts. Many convicts incarcerated in Soviet times are critical of younger convicts who flout the strict rules that once governed the symbolism of tattoos. According to Lambert, many convicts and researchers believe that the most serious blow to the code and its accompanying tattoos was the “Communist collapse and the advent of the capitalistic new Russians.” In a criminal society where honor was once paramount, money is now king. In the words of inmate Ivan Nechaikin, who has spent forty-two years in the “zone,” the *vory v zakone* “were excellent people” because “they maintained strict order.” He adds that, “now, the New Russians have come and I don’t know if they are real Thieves or not.” The thieves’ code is now being eroded by wealthy new Russians, who can buy the rank of a legitimate *vor v zakone*. Although this practice typically

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56 Heyman, 206.
57 Lambert, 111.
58 Ibid., 17.
59 As cited in Lambert, 111.
occurs outside of prison, a similar situation happens within prison walls. Twenty-four-year-old inmate Alexei Kuznetsov explains that “rank is built mostly on personalities and leadership qualities and on how much money, or goods that can be valued in money, that someone has.”

The movement away from the storied code can also be observed through the new classification of prisoners: there are the Blues, with blue-dye tattoos, and the White Collars, or New Russians, who do not wear tattoos. Additionally, many young convicts simply get tattoos of whatever they want, demonstrating a disregard for the previous honor and loyalty to the thieves’ code.

A degradation of the thieves’ code is also visible in some inmates’ greater willingness to cooperate with prison authorities. The reasons for this trend are not very clear in Russia, but Shoham explains that a growing number of Russian inmates in Israeli prisons have agreed to participate in treatment programs aimed at creating more peaceful relations between inmates and prison authorities:

This program’s purpose is to diminish the Russian prisoners’ suspicion and reluctance to cooperate with the prison treatment programs and to provide normative alternatives for integrating into the community by Hebrew language study, job placement, and the lowering of the cultural and social barriers between the Russian immigrants and the Israeli society to which they will return once they are released from prison.

This treatment program provides what is perhaps an overly optimistic solution for establishing better cooperation from convicts. Shoham points out that no one expects to see quick, positive results from the program, but the results nevertheless demonstrate a weakening of the thieves’ code. If treatment programs like the one in Israeli prisons became more widespread in Russia, criminal activity among the prison population could potentially be diminished. Lambert mentions

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60 As cited in Lambert, 111.
61 Lambert, 131.
62 Shoham, 1001.
that one such program exists in Russia, but it operates outside of prison walls. The Social Charity Organization for Human Rights, which was created by Andrei Babushkin, provides support for released prisoners. The majority of Russian inmates are repeat offenders (as seen by the numerous cupolas tattooed on their backs), so an effective treatment program could potentially prevent this tendency among younger convicts. Just as in Israeli prisons, however, the chance of creating positive results in Russian prisons is slim, since adherence to the code is most likely the strongest in Russia. Lambert writes: "Prisoners and prison statistics alike forecast that a large portion of inmates will commit a crime after release and earn a repeat sentence. Encountering returning cellmates is so common that prisoners call a person they haven’t seen for two years “deceased.” The pressure outside of prison to commit new crimes forces many professional criminals back to prison for further sentences. Low budgets are an additional impediment to the implementation of such programs in Russian prisons.

Life in Soviet prison camps was extremely difficult, and the same prison culture has continued to exist in modern-day Russia partly because of financial reasons. Much of the infrastructure has changed very little. According to the Moscow Center for Prison Reform, “sixty percent of the buildings are in emergency or otherwise unsatisfactory condition, requiring capital repairs.” Despite the necessity for renovations, there are no funds for them. In her introduction to the Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopedia Volume II, Anne Applebaum recounts her 1998 visit to a prison in the Russian far north, describing the “narrow and dark” corridors with “damp,
slimy walls” that “seemed hardly to have changed” since the time of Stalin.\textsuperscript{66}

It is not only the outdated physical condition of the prison compounds that takes its toll on inmates, but also the effects of prison overpopulation. Applebaum explains that she witnessed twenty men crowded together in a single cell, despite the fact that one cell is designed to hold far fewer men. According to the Moscow Center for Prison Reform, “the general-type corrective facilities are over-filled to 110 percent of capacity.”\textsuperscript{67} Overcrowding results in unsanitary living conditions, which can then lead to an outbreak of deadly diseases like tuberculosis. Applebaum notes that the plague of tuberculosis in Russian prisons began in the 1960s, and still continues today. Without proper prison funding, inmates cannot receive proper medical treatment for their illnesses. In addition to disease, many inmates become addicted to drugs, creating more medical problems. An inmate interviewed by Lambert added that “all the Blats are drug addicts. You can find any drug that you wish in the Zone—heroine, cocaine, well, everything.”\textsuperscript{68} As a result of more widespread drug use in prison, tattoos depicting syringes have become popular.

Although the thieves’ code has weakened since the fall of the Soviet Union, many still adhere to it both inside and outside of prison walls. For example, reminiscent of the once all-powerful criminal hierarchy, today’s \textit{pakhan} still eat very well in prison. Lambert notes that, “[the \textit{pakhan}] lives off the invisible network of carriers that make up the prison ‘post system.’”\textsuperscript{69} This system of secretly delivering food and other contraband is conducted on “roads” in between cells. Lambert believes that this “unofficial government of \textit{pakhans} and postmen remains as the

\begin{footnotes}
\item[66] Applebaum, 25.
\item[67] Moscow Center for Prison Reform, “Problems of the Penal System Functioning.”
\item[68] Lambert, 131.
\item[69] Ibid., 112.
\end{footnotes}
Thieves’ Code,” even though the strict adherence to the language of tattoos has been jeopardized. Inmates still prefer to adhere to this invisible infrastructure instead of following the rules of the prison authorities.

The Russian criminal world that originated in the Soviet labor camps has now permeated civil society internationally. Russian organized crime not only creates problems for Russian law enforcement, but it is a significant issue in other countries, especially the United States. Applebaum writes:

The collapse of the Soviet Union did not destroy these practices, or the Russian professional prison caste itself. Many of its leaders moved on, ‘graduating’ to become leaders of the mafia gangs that control commerce and crime in Russian cities. But many of the lower ranking members live just as they have for a century.”

The nature of Russian organized crime, both in Russia and abroad, reflects the Soviet society in which many of its criminals grew up. James O. Finkenauer and Elin J. Waring suggest that “Russians were socialized into an environment that rewarded scheming and scamming and penalized playing it straight.” Although prostitution, murder, and robbery are major activities, fraud is the most common type of crime committed by organized Russian criminals in the United States. Russian organized crime, therefore, tends to be highly sophisticated and very difficult to track.

How does the current globalization of Russian organized crime affect the preservation of the thieves’ code? Federico Varese observes that the majority of notable Russian criminals no longer “subscribe to the vory’s ideals and norms,” and it follows that law enforcement now has to

70 Ibid.
71 Applebaum, 25.
72 Finkenauer and Waring, Russian Mafia in America, 37.
contend with a new type of criminal.\textsuperscript{74} This change likely stems from the disparity between the concentrated world of the Soviet labor camp (where adherence to the code was highest) and the worldwide scale of today’s large-scale criminal operations, which mostly occur outside of prison walls.

What does this degradation of the thieves’ code mean for future generations of criminals and law enforcement? Without strict adherence to the code, criminal activity is much less predictable, since the newer criminals do not share the same values. This change also creates hardships for criminal investigators, who could previously know the past of a deceased criminal merely from the tattoos on his corpse. In a country where every fourth adult male has spent time in prison,\textsuperscript{75} it is crucial to understand the meaning of criminal tattoos and what they can tell us about the world of thieves.

\textbf{Works Cited}


\textsuperscript{74} Varese, 8.

\textsuperscript{75} Plutser-Sarno, \textit{Encyclopedia Volume I}, 53.


