



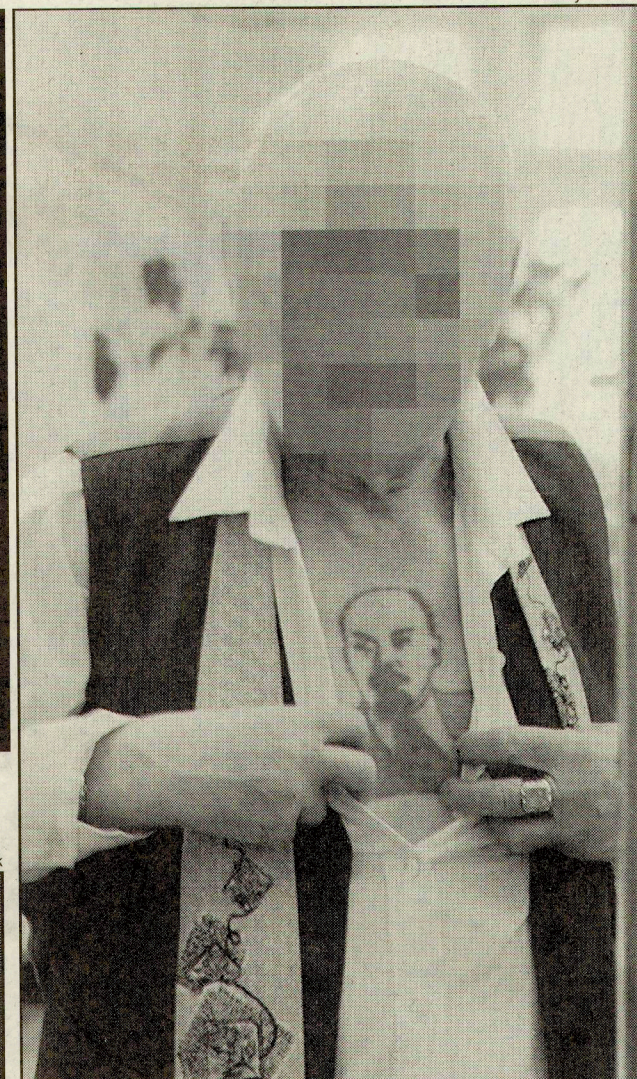
WORLD NEWS

Russia's gangs go to war



Dimitry Beliakov

“A new war between gangs could break out at any time. What the mafia is seeing now in Russia is absolute chaos. We could all start tearing each other apart”



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Young godfathers fight to take over mafia

Network

by Mark Franchetti
Moscow

AS THE convoy of black Volgas drew up outside a restaurant in a bleak north Russian town, three heavily built young men clutching mobile telephones peered nervously around them. Only when they were satisfied that it was safe did they allow their boss, an ageing mafia godfather known as the Survivor, to step into the snow.

As he entered the restaurant, the diners fell silent. The proprietor and several other men lined up to kiss him on both cheeks and touch his hand. Then he was seated in a private room that is kept in a permanent state of readiness for his unannounced visits.

With four industrial regions under his command, the Survivor is as accustomed to deference as he is to the rigour of the security operation that surrounds him. His men are in awe of him, but he was stabbed a year ago in an attack that signified the growing threat of an all-out mafia war.

The Russian mafia's rapid expansion since the fall of communism is described by the interior ministry in Moscow as the country's most pressing problem. More than 9,000 gangs are operating, and the mafia's operations now extend to 40 nations.

Within the mafia, however, tension is increasing between older godfathers who abide by strict traditional principles and a new breed of ruthless young bosses who are challenging their authority. The younger godfathers earn millions of dollars from crimes such as drug



Violent times: KGB agents arrest a racketeer in Moscow. Mafia godfathers do not see government agents as a threat

trafficking that were previously considered "unethical".

The Survivor, whose nickname evokes the resilience with which he served 36 years in Soviet penal colonies, and the "Star", a younger mafia boss in a different part of Russia, agreed to be interviewed for the first time on condition they were not identified. Their stories reveal the contrasts and increasingly lethal conflicts between the generations.

As the 66-year-old Survivor drank vodka at the restaurant, he acknowledged his apprehension at the rise of the young turks. "We are living through difficult times and a new war between gangs could break out

at any time," he said. "Our world has changed dramatically. What the mafia is seeing now in Russia is absolute chaos. It's getting very dangerous. We could all start tearing each other apart."

Since his last release from prison four years ago, the Survivor has fought off competition from younger, more aggressive mafia leaders.

Dozens of his contemporaries, however, have been gunned down. "I never used to have bodyguards with me," he said. "Now I never travel without my boys."

"Nowadays you need strong, respected men around to take care of everything. Things

are hotting up between the old and the young guard, and my boys will do anything I ask them. They are just waiting for my signal and they'll get rid of anyone."

It was inside Soviet penal colonies, where he served sentences for thefts and burglaries, that he rose to power. "I watched the underworld and saw how people became leaders," he recalled. "Sometimes I had to fight like an animal to prove myself."

The respect he earned led to his crowning as a *vor v zakonye* or "thief in law", as the bosses of Russia's oldest criminal fraternities are known. According to the beliefs of the so-

called Thieves' World, whose traditions date back to the 18th century, his coronation had to be sponsored by at least two other thieves who vouched for him.

"A real thief was not allowed to marry or have a family," said the Survivor. "He was not allowed to serve in the army, hold a job, pay taxes, have a residence permit or possess personal property. A real thief was untainted and free."

The authority this lifestyle bestowed has allowed him to act as an arbitrator in a country where police corruption is rife and few crimes are solved. Many businessmen turn to him to put pressure on competitors

Rivals in the power game: the Star, left, and the Survivor

or have debts settled. "I am the law here," he said. "I will get the money back, solve their troubles and take a 50% cut. I am here to avoid conflicts and bloodsheds."

Those who refuse to pay are taken to a nearby wood and suspended upside-down from a tree. Part of the money collected is paid into the *obschack*, a communal mafia fund used to support gang members held in prison.

Thieves in law were traditionally identified by a series of tattoos denoting rank. Certain tattoos had to be "earned", and it was viewed as a serious crime for an ordinary criminal to be seen with the tattoo of a thief.

Rolling up his trousers, the Survivor proudly showed off stars tattooed on both knees, and a portrait of Lenin, the former Soviet leader, on his chest. "The stars mean that I will never kneel down for anyone," he said. "They can break my back but nobody will ever have me on my knees."

"I carry Lenin because in the old days we used to say that a Soviet execution platoon would never shoot at his portrait. It was an old superstition. Others had Stalin on their backs as well, but I have a knight wearing a tiger skin, which is a symbol of manhood."

The Survivor's conflict with the country's new mafia gangs is as much over ideology as power. Most Soviet thieves in law led a modest life, aspiring to influence and respect rather than a luxurious lifestyle. They did not dabble in business.

By contrast the Star, a 44-year-old godfather who presides over an eastern Russian region the size of Scotland, owns several businesses, including a luxury restaurant and a nightclub.

An indication of the increasing violence of the underworld inhabited by the younger generation is that four of his closest friends have been shot dead in the past year. He has escaped several car bombings and lives barricaded in a mansion protected by the latest electronic security and two pitbulls.

The Star travels in an armoured Mercedes and is always surrounded by four bodyguards. The windows to his bedroom are reinforced with iron bars and wire netting to protect him from hand grenades.

"Perestroika gave us the chance to grow and to live a great life," said the Star, who served 15 years in Soviet labour camps. "I didn't want to be a working-class man. I hated the communists and the way they had become rich at our ex-

pense." A former martial arts fighter, he recruited his mafia clan from the world of sport, drawing in dozens of former boxers to his fight for regional supremacy.

"We had people everywhere and fast became the strongest," he said. "We knew everything about every businessman and shopkeeper in our area. We had police informers and paid them off."

He modelled himself, he said, on Vito Corleone, the central figure of *The Godfather*, the Mario Puzo novel made into a Hollywood blockbuster starring Marlon Brando. He read the book six times while in prison, memorising Corleone's monologues and copying his manners.

Dressing in designer suits and wearing a diamond-studded Cartier watch, the Star says that while he does not adhere to the old ideas, he has principles of his own. He distances himself from the most extreme tactics of his young contemporaries. The Star plans to legalise his various business interests and is increasingly looking to expand abroad.

He has recently travelled to several business meetings outside Russia and says he works an 18-hour day.

"I do not kill people," he said as he lay on a king-size mahogany bed surrounded by mirrors and palms. "I don't know why the police suspect me of so many murders. I don't know what happens to people who cross my path or become my competitors. They just disappear — probably because they realise they are in the wrong and should leave."

"But if I knew that a particular person had killed one of my friends, I would not give the order to have him wiped out. I would kill him myself."

Until recently, the Star kept a bear caged in his garden to which his bodyguards used to chain debtors to talk them into paying up. "The truth in today's Russia is that we are the ones to rule the place and control the situation," he said. "Let the police and the intelligence services say what they want. I don't even think of them as a threat or as a rival."

"I don't care about them or about their president. I live in my own world and by my own rules. I live an honest life and don't think I am doing any harm to my country. I am not an American spy or an Irish terrorist. I am a boss and we are the ones running Russia. No doubt about that."

"Vito Corleone said that the mafia is a shelter. We consider ourselves like a shelter for all those who are hurt, who are seeking revenge or just a job. I am not like those big criminal bosses who sell their honour for money. My honour is intact."

Additional reporting:
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