The Kazan Leviathan: Russian street gangs as agents of social order

Svetlana Stephenson

Abstract

This article discusses the evolution of street gangs in the Russian city of Kazan. Using historic and interview data, it shows that the changes in the social organization of these gangs were a reaction to a series of systemic crises in the Soviet and post-Soviet social order. As a result of power deficits, emerging in the space of the streets and in the larger society, the gangs moved through several stages: a) youth peer groups acting out traditional prescriptions of masculine socialisation; (b) territorial 'elite' formations; (c) 'violent entrepreneurs' and (d) autonomous ruling regimes. The article demonstrates that the gangs, while utilising violence to achieve their projects of social and economic domination, may also regulate its use. It argues that the gangs can be seen as historic agents participating in ground-level social regulation, and not simply products and producers of social disorder.

The period of the collapse of Soviet state socialism and the birth of a new capitalist society at the end of the 1980s and in the 1990s is often characterised in Russia as a time of *bespredel* [limitlessness or lawlessness] – an *absence* of any moral or legal regulation of social life. In the abnormality of this absence, people were at a loss as to how to navigate a world whose normative map was now torn apart, and in which previously unseen predators seemed to have surfaced and moved onto the central stage. Shady entrepreneurs, mafia groups and street gangs of young people represented a new frightening reality and reflected a slide into the rule of unbridled greed, violence and brute force.

However, this picture of social disorganization – of a profound social 'crisis' (Shevchenko, 2009) – masks the reality of new social orders being established in the cracks of the Russian state. The 'predators' were not simply the personification of 'social evil', nor were they just parasites exploiting the situation of economic and normative collapse. They responded to the emerging power deficits by creating their own systems of violent rule.

Researchers have shown how various pre-existing Soviet networks and organizations, for example those established in the *Komsomol* (communist youth orgnisation) and party circles, by black marketeers, professional criminals, groups of migrants etc., became important players in taking control of resources during the period of rapid disintegration of the Soviet system

(Ledeneva, 1998: 90; Humphrey, 2002; Nazpary, 2002). Among other new actors operating in this informal sphere were the so-called *bandits*, members of organised criminal groups (Volkov, 2002). As Volkov demonstrated, many of these *bandits* were ex-sportsmen, veterans of the Afghan war and former police and special paramilitary employees – in other words, people well experienced in the technologies of violent intimidation and with the necessary connections to move into the world of *violent entrepreneurship*, ie the use of force for economic gains. The brute force which they could mobilise was also well suited to, and widely used in, mediation of conflict and provision of other business 'services'.

More limited attention has been paid to the street gang, a form of social organization that at the same time developed a major presence in the urban scene. The processes of transmutations of these groups in the Soviet period and their transformation into local 'ruling regimes' at the time of systemic crisis in Russia in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, together with the further changes that they underwent with the stabilisation of the Russian state in the 2000s, present, I would argue, a very important case for the study of informal power structures and, more widely, 'governance from below' (Lea, 2002; Stenson, 2005).

The neighbourhood social organizations that became local agents of power were initially inclusive peer groups, companies of kids of different ages who spent time playing together, going to local dance halls and football matches, and defending their turf from other youngsters. How did they become the informal lords of the city quarters, instilling fear and awe into the local residents, capturing street business opportunities and even moving into positions of wealth and power in the larger society?

Background to the case-study: the Kazan gangs

In what follows I focus on youth street gangs in the Russian city of Kazan. Even in the Soviet days it was widely known that this city had a 'gang problem'. Although juvenile delinquency and crime had almost never been publicly discussed since the 1930s (Connor, 1972; Pilkington, 1994; Stephenson, 2001a), in the 1980s these gangs became the subject of discussion and debate by Soviet criminologists, sociologists and the mass media, in what sometimes amounted to moral panic. The catalyst for this was a trial in 1979–80 which led to the prosecution of members of a large local gang named Tyap-Lyap. The city, it emerged, was the base for hundreds of territorial gangs of young people who were fighting for control over the streets and engaged in serious violence and crime. The so called 'Kazan phenomenon' was identified, and criminological research was expanded to other cities in Russia where similar gangs were found.[1]

Studies of youth gangs continued in the 1990s, following the crisis and collapse of the Soviet Union (Kashelkin, 1990; Ovchinskiy, 1990; Petelin, 1990;

Sibiriakov, 1990; Ageeva, 1991; Prozumentov, 1993; Bulatov and Shesler, 1994). These studies were largely based around a social control perspective, and tended to use police data rather than ethnographic research with young people. Among notable exceptions is the work of Kazan criminologists, involved in a long-standing research project into the gangs in the Volga region (Salagaev and Shashkin, 2002; Salagaev, 2005; Salagaev *et al.*, 2005). They studied the social practices of the gangs in a number of cities in the area, how gang members construct their masculinity, victimise non-gang members and join the ranks of adult organised crime. These authors argued that the origins of Kazan gangs were surprisingly similar to those of the gangs described by the Chicago school in America in the 1920s and 1930s (Thrasher, 1927). As in the US, initially these were spontaneous peer groups, which tended to emerge in peripheral urban areas populated by recent migrants. Young men offered each other companionship and protection, with the gang acting both as a play group and an alternative family, particularly for those kids whose family life was seriously disorganised (Stephenson, 2001b). The gangs tended to develop through similar group processes – those gangs that were most durable were also more likely to move into crime and use violence to a greater extent than unstable and disorganised peer groups (cf: Klein, 1971; Klein, 1995).

The Chicago school's social disorganization perspective, however, does not offer a way of understanding the processes of transformation of the Kazan peer groups into the wielders of local power. Instead of seeing the gangs as simply agents of street violence and crime or peer networks acting as 'quasi-families' for its members, we need to address the dialectical relationship between their collective *self-production* (Wacquant, 2006), their meanings, internal codes and norms, and the wider social order.

In this paper I show that being grounded in the space of the street, which is always the sphere of the informal and extra-legal, a gang is highly responsive to the contradictions and problems of the social order, to the power deficits that emerge in the larger political economy, and in certain circumstances it can move (or be mobilized to move) to fill the power vacuum – at least at the local level. This requires a transformation of the gang's internal structures and normative codes. Using Lockwood's terminology, it is possible to say that the gang's social integration becomes the reverse of the system integration (Lockwood, 1992).

The paper is organised in the following way. I discuss theoretical approaches to the crisis of social order at the macro-societal level and in the space of the streets. I then analyse the evolution of gangs in Kazan, and show that with each crisis of macro-social regulation, the social organization on the street level also changed. Between the 1950s and the 2000s these gangs went through several stages: (a) peer groups acting out traditional prescriptions of masculine socialisation; (b) territorial 'elite' formations; (c) 'violent entrepreneurs' (Blok, 1974; Volkov, 2002); and finally (d) autonomous ruling regimes. I then demonstrate the role that the gang played in the system of 'fractured sovereignty' (Shearing, 1992) at the local level, including its relations with the

state agents of power, the schools and the local community. I move on to highlight the recent transformation of the gang under the conditions of the strengthening of the Russian state.

The materials analysed for this article include available Russian sources on the history of Kazan gangs, as well as interviews conducted in Kazan in 2005. The main part of the project consisted of 32 in-depth interviews with active gang members. The interviewees were aged 17–35,[2] all male (although some of the gangs are mixed, the majority of gangs have only male membership). They were of both Russian and Tatar ethnicity (the Kazan gangs are multi-ethnic, which reflects a high degree of ethnic assimilation in this city). The interviews were tape-recorded and then transcribed. Interviews were also conducted with former gang members; local young people who were not members of the gangs; teachers and school psychologists; and representatives of the police (*militia*) and the State Prosecution service (*Prokuratura*).

While achieving access to gang members can be a very difficult enterprise, requiring trust and acceptance between researchers and researched, this project benefited significantly from the long-standing programme of research on gangs in Kazan, carried out by researchers from the Kazan State Techno-logical University led by Alexander Salagaev. This programme, which started in 1983 and continued through to the 2000s, involved in-depth ethnographic research with gang members. Over the years, access to interviewees – gang members – was achieved by building upon initial contacts with local residents, friends, neighbours, relatives and former school-mates of the researchers, as well as university students who were present or past members of gangs. In the study that I analyse here, the fact that the principal field investigator, Rustem Safin, also lived at the research site where gangs were endemic, meant that there were some shared understandings of the local context, as well mutual acquaintances and friends. Obviously, interviewing gangs can be fraught with danger (Rodgers, 2007), and here the researcher's local 'reputation' was an invaluable asset, representing a form of social capital which would otherwise have been difficult to build. Although many interviewees were personally known to the researcher, all of them were guaranteed anonymity. Nevertheless, some of the interviewees were concerned that the information they gave could be used against them. They were assured that neither they nor their gangs would be identified in the transcripts and research outputs, and moreover that the principal interest of the project was not in their and their group's specific deviant activities but in the histories and social organization of their groups and their relationships with the local communities. The lack of focus on specific named gangs helped overcome another potential pitfall of gang research – that of glamorising gang activities and building the gangs' 'brand' names (Klein, 1971; Aldridge *et al.*, 2008). It was not only the gangs' names which were omitted, no direct questions were asked about the interviewees' own positions in the gang structure (although in some cases the interviewees volunteered this information). The lack of this information is obviously regrettable, but this was the price to pay for getting access to this closed social world.

In the interviews, the gang members talked about their groups time and time again as agents of ground-level social order, particularly where money was concerned, but in other areas of life as well. These narratives may have been partly influenced by the desire of the interviewees to present themselves and their groups in a positive light. Whether the gang members themselves wholeheartedly believed in this legitimising discourse is hard to say. Some of the elements of this discourse (particularly the codes of conduct shared by the organised criminal gangs, the fairness and transparency of their 'business' practices) may have questionable veracity. What is important, however, is that these constructions were echoed by many of the local residents and even agents of state power. The gangs were perceived not merely as a source of violence and danger (although this discourse was also present in the interviews), but also as a 'necessary evil', an agent of social regulation in a situation when the state was weak, inefficient and corrupt. As Ries showed in her paper on Saratov *bandits*, both the mafia and popular discourses, which emphasise the gangs as a 'normal, necessary, and even comforting presence in day-to-day life', can be seen as 'dialogically reinforcing and building upon each other, capturing – in the symbolic codes of narrative – some crucial dimensions of the restructuring social world' (Ries, 2002: 284, 305). In other words, irrespective of the actual veracity of these legitimising narratives, their very existence is indicative of the ways in which the role and functions of the gangs are constructed by both their members and by members of the wider society.

Theoretical and conceptual traditions

Although there exists a vast literature on youth gangs – while the term itself can cover a wide variety of peer associations (Hallsworth and Young, 2006), most gang studies have tended to approach street youth organizations as peer groups where young people are united for companionship and protection (Thrasher, 1927), or as mainly criminal economic enterprises, which in recent decades have been progressively moving to 'corporatization' (Hagedorn and Macon, 1988; Vigil, 1988; Moore, 1991; Sánchez-Jankowski, 2003; Pitts, 2008). Gangs have also been seen as oppositional institutions, developed by low-class individuals to demonstrate their resistance to mainstream culture (Miller, 1958; Wolfgang and Ferracuti, 1967), or as collectives which draw in young people with a particular propensity towards violence (Yablonsky, 1962).

In contrast to the volume of literature on the mafia, the role of the street gang in local power structures has received relatively little attention in sociology and criminology. This is hardly surprising, as street gangs often have a volatile, flexible nature, and their involvement in organised crime, not to say local power arrangements, may be much less serious than is often presented by the media and/or perceived popularly. However, in certain historical circumstances, when profound power deficits emerge, both in the spaces where young

peer collectives operate (i.e. on the street) and in society at large, the gang may mobilise to fill these deficits and become a systemic agent of power rather than just an institution organising leisure, expressing resistance or acting as a vehicle of economic enrichment. In conditions of the crisis of the state, the weak penetration of the institutions of law and order in low income areas, social isolation and fragmentation, the gang can become an agent of economic and social order in the local community (Sullivan, 1989; Rodgers, 1999; Venkatesh, 2000; Brotherton and Barrios, 2004; Hagedorn, 2008). As Sánchez-Jankowski showed in his book on American gangs, they can play a structuring role in areas where mainstream institutions have lost the trust of residents and where residents can relate to them as neighbourhood organizations (Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991).

In the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia, as I demonstrate below, significant changes in the collective behaviour of violent street groups emerged in response to specific structural problems in Soviet social order. The first period – the 1950s–1960s – was a time of rapid industrialisation and massive dislocation in rural and urban areas. The second period – the 1970s – was when a vast shadow market emerged alongside the Soviet planned economy, and the third – the end of 1980s–1990s – was the time of transition to market capitalism. While all these processes and problems existed at the national level, Kazan, it can be argued, became a particularly prominent case of social organization from below because of the history of its urban development (rapid industrialisation accompanied by vast rural-urban migration), its economic sector, with a concentration of production in large industrial enterprises that made it particularly vulnerable to the crises of the Soviet planned economy, and patterns of population settlement in ethnically mixed residential estates. The social ecology of Kazan, it can be argued, created conditions for massive social disorganization and increased levels of violence – in some ways similar to those explored by the Chicago school (Thrasher, 1927; Wirth, 1938; Simmel, 1969). Young people then responded to the increased insecurity and uncertainty created by these systemic problems into their own and their communities' lives, and to the particular power deficits that emerged at the macro-level (broad social order) and micro-level (the level of the street), by building strong neighbourhood organizations with vertical leadership structures and internal normative codes.

The crisis of social order and absence of perceived conventions and regularities of human existence – something that the Russian word *bespredel* refers to – brings us back to Thomas Hobbes's classical work 'Leviathan'. Writing at the time of the English civil war, Hobbes was concerned about the descent of humanity into a state of lawlessness, about their inability, in the absence of a coercive state, to pursue collective existence. Chaotic life outside any power conventions was associated with universal conflict, physical violence and constant fear for one's life at the hands of fellow human beings. Hobbes is sometimes criticised for his bleak view of human nature, for underestimating people's capacity for building mutually beneficial co-operative

arrangements and for presuming that 'war of all against all' is a natural human condition. However, as David Wrong points out, 'Hobbes saw the war as a hypothetical construct rather than as a condition that had at a time generally existed in human history but had been overcome by the implementation of a social contract . . . at most, the war of all against all represented a limiting condition toward which all societies tended in times of weakened political authority and internal conflict' (Wrong, 1994: 16–17). This condition is indeed something that we find not just in postcommunist Russia, but across the disadvantaged areas of advanced Western societies as well as at the lawless periphery of late modern capitalism (Dowdney, 2005; Hagedorn, 2008).

Apart from the Hobbesian problem of endemic insecurity and inability to pursue positive goals resulting from the crisis of state sovereignty, we can also talk about the Hobbesian problem in the space of the street. The micro-world of the urban streets – the space where children and young people, especially boys, spend much of their time – is a space where risk and fear are a constant feature of everyday life. For children and youths, the street is a space of freedom (from the prescriptions of parents and school), as well as a space of violence. The streets are public places where state regulation is weak, and where juveniles can find themselves outside the social contract formed by adults.

Some leading sociologists have written about places which create difficulties in regulating interaction. James Scott (1990) wrote about spaces with inhibited the potential for asserting state control, while Pierre Bourdieu (1992) noted that the streets are 'bad places' which create contact between people who should not come into contact in their daily life. The problem of order is ever-present in the unregulated world of the streets. As criminologist Bruce Jacobs pointed out in his survey of street drug dealers, 'the streets are a stage. They are places where dignity, honour and respect are won and lost on a daily basis' (2000: 54).

For those young people, who spend a significant amount of time on the street – be it due to the cultural prescriptions of masculinity requiring that boys and young men socialise with their peers outside home, or indeed to the need to make a living in the street economy – public spaces can become their main habitat, a centre of their life world. But in these spaces, children and young people – just like any other group for whom the street is the main environment – may experience profound insecurity (Hesse, 1992; Watt and Stenson, 1998).

In unregulated street interactions, where there are no firm obligations and norms, the main threat is ultimately to individual survival – and the main task is self-protection. This imperative becomes particularly acute where other systems of regulation of social relations (be it by the state or by the local community) are weak or non-existent. As Hobbes argued in 'Leviathan', in circumstances where every 'man' is potentially against every 'man', individual reputation for violence becomes the key resource. In a situation of a 'war of all against all', reputation and respect become the key conditions of survival:

> . . . every man looketh that his companion should value him, at the same rate he sets upon himself: and upon all signs of contempt, or undervaluing, naturally endeavours, as far as he dares (which amongst them that have no common power to keep them in quiet, is far enough to make them destroy each other) to extort a greater value from his contemners, by damage; and from others, by the example (Hobbes, 1996: 83).

This thesis about the pivotal role of personal reputation and 'respect' in conditions of general lawlessness finds its modern confirmation in studies of social disintegration in the ghetto (Katz, 1988; Anderson, 1999; Bourgois, 1995; Barker, 2005). These studies have shown that as the local institutions of law and order collapsed, individuals (largely men) felt compelled to campaign for 'respect' on the streets by using extreme violence or its threat.

For Hobbes, the establishment of collective power arrangements regulating the use of violence was the only way to overcome individual insecurity. He argued that only by resolving the problem of sovereignty, by giving a person or a group the authority to uphold social conventions and use coercion for that purpose, could people overcome their fear and ensure the necessary peace. And only on that basis would they then be able to develop fruitful economic activity, establish trade and commerce, organise taxation, care for the infirm and so on.

Hobbes of course did not write about micro-social organizations which become collective agents of organised violence. He was concerned with larger social formations, with nations rather than small 'tribal' groups. But, as I will show later, the idea of an order-building imperative as the key condition of social life can be used fruitfully to understand the social transformation and practices of juvenile 'nations'[3] particularly at the time when the larger social order becomes fragmented.

The notion of sovereignty has long been associated with ultimate authority within a territory, which is to say authority which is absolute rather than partial (see, for example, James, 1999). Over time, the nation state has become the supreme guarantor of order within its territorial borders (Giddens, 1985). As Max Weber argued (1970: 78), a monopoly over the legitimate use of physical force becomes the basis for state authority. However some scholars have discussed the possibility of multiple systems of territorial power which, as criminologist Clifford D. Shearing put it, form 'a mosaic of contradictory controls that simultaneously bear on the individual' (1992: 422). Describing the system of fractured sovereignty, Shearing agrees with those legal pluralists who 'dispute a conception of the political and legal spheres as organized vertically with the state at the apex. In its place they suggest a more horizontally organized sphere of linked but autonomous entities with mutual claims over each other, characterized by considerable fluidity and flux' (1992: 422). The work of Foucault (Foucault, 1977; Foucault, 1981) and his conception of power as decentred and embedded in relationships can be fruitfully used, as Shearing suggests, to understand the fragmented nature of power and

authority. Similarly, Robert Latham suggests that a concept of social sover-eignty can elucidate how 'in later modernity both the state and a diverse range of non-state actors . . . can be central to the government in an increasingly wide range of social domains' (2000: 2).

In this paper I argue that unlike the anomic world of the post-industrial ghetto, the gangs in Kazan have managed to construct a system of collective power and even became sovereign agents in their territories. While not solv-ing the problem of the 'war of all against all', they have channelled violence into predictable, ritualised and organised forms. Paraphrasing Marx, who said that 'Peter the Great overthrew Russian barbarism through barbarity' (Marx *et al.*, 1900: 201), we can say that the Russian organised gang violently resolved the problem of violence.

The evolution of the Kazan gangs

In this section I show that the evolution of the Kazan gangs was a response to the profound structural changes in Soviet society, with the gangs changing their role and structure as a result of the emerging power deficits.

The city of Kazan is the capital of the autonomous Republic of Tatarstan, a part of the Russian Federation. It is situated on the Volga river, about 797 kilometres from Moscow. At the end of 1950s-1960s Kazan, together with many other cities and settlements of Tatarstan, went through a phase of hyper-industrialisation.[4] A large populace of new urban dwellers was thus created, comprising Russians, Tatars and people of other nationalities, which was highly assimilated and formed mixed communities around the new working class residential quarters. The new interstitial city areas became the arenas where the first youth street societies emerged. Similarly to Thrasher's classic account of Chicago's juvenile gangs in the 1920s, in Kazan children and teenagers formed peer groups, spending time together on the streets, playing together and battling for reputation and respect. Testing each other's strength, different courtyards fought street boxing matches and had altercations at outdoor dance halls, in parks, stadiums and other local arenas.

At least some of the groups, with increasing threats to their members' safety, moved to a higher level of organization (Ageeva, 1991). They created makeshift gyms in the basements of their blocks of flats, joined boxing groups, made incursions into 'enemy territory' and eventually managed to overcome their adversaries by teaming up with young people from neighbouring city areas. In conditions of urban insecurity and threats to the safety of its members, a peer group was transformed into an 'elite' territorial formation. As Randall Collins has argued, violent fighting 'elites', as opposed to disorga-nized violent actors, enact membership in an honoured category and thus can raise themselves above 'the commoners'. They can rely on reputations 'circu-lated in established community networks' and thus avoid engagement in unscripted and spontaneous violent acts (Collins, 2008: 226). There urban

warriors reproduced many of the rural traditions of ritualised violence. Sometimes they organised 'arranged combats' where young people would resolve individual confrontations by challenging their adversaries to come to an arranged group fight (Zabryanskiy, 1990; Shchepanskaya, 2001). Many such territorial groups exist in Russian cities today; they are still involved in arranged combat, as well as attacks on categorically defined enemies, such as members of youth subcultural groups, non-Russian ethnics, members of other territorial 'elites' etc. (Pilkington, 2002; Golovin and Lurie, 2004; Omel'chenko, 2006; Stephenson, 2008).

The next stage in the evolution of the Kazan gangs was the period between 1970 and 1975. This period saw the appearance of shadow producers (*tsekhoviki*) in the Soviet Union, when managers of state companies began to develop off-the-books production and distribution of goods. The new unregulated economic sector started to attract the interest of professional criminals (the so-called *thieves*), and thus a need emerged for informal security arrangements. Some companies developed their own structures of protection, while others co-operated with existing criminal groups (Gurov, 1990; Salagaev, 2001). Also, in this shadow economy, in a way similar to the drug economies, there was a need for transportation and sale of unaccounted goods, as well as a system of dispute resolution. Serious destabilisation of the economic sector and a need for new power agents outside the state inevitably led to disordering and re-ordering processes in the space of the streets. Youth peer groups represented a vital violent resource, and criminal groups and shadow entrepreneurs started trying to mobilise them. Some groups embraced the new opportunities. Other street groups, not wanting to become agents of criminal violence, had to fight to preserve their independence. They too developed more rigid self-organization and started to use weapons. This process mirrors the history of American street gangs, where some gangs emerged not just as spontaneous youth organizations, but were also organized by adults – businessmen, racketeers or politicians (Wacquant, 2006), or developed in order to protect their territory from new *bandit* groups. As Ann Campbell points out, 'where a powerful gang becomes a threat for nearby territories, new gangs arise for their defence' (Campbell, 1991: 236). At the end of the 1980s every third young man aged between 12 and 18 was member of a territorial group (Plaksiy, 1990: 90). While most of these groups were involved in group fights and petty delinquency, some evolved from elite territorial formations to *violent entrepreneurs* – who used their violent resources for economic gains (see Table 1).

The next stage in the development of Kazan gangs was associated with the crisis of state socialism and the transition to market capitalism. The economic restructuring of the post-perestroika era hit the military production companies of Kazan very hard, although the socio-economic crisis of the first half of the 1990s was less severe here than in most of the Russian regions[5]. At the same time, new co-operative businesses and private enterprises emerged. A vast sphere of entrepreneurial activities suddenly opened up at the street level

Table 1 Typology of street organizations

	Structure	Type of violence	Targets of violent control
Street peer networks	Horizontal informal ties	Spontaneous	Situationally defined enemies
Territorial elites	Largely egalitarian, often with informal leadership	Ritualised	Categorically defined enemy groups
Violent entrepreneurs	Hierarchical, with a normative code organising internal cohesion	Instrumental	Legal and illegal businesses
Autonomous ruling regimes	Hierarchical, with a normative code organising internal cohesion and regulating relationships with the local population	Sovereign control over street territory	All participants in street space

(outdoor markets, small stalls and kiosks, parking lots, street drug trade and prostitution). This new informal street economic sector existed in a legal and regulatory vacuum, with state institutions being weak or corrupt. Soon the streets became a battleground for the competing interests of older criminals, shady businessmen, police and security services, local authorities, etc. (cf. Nazpary, 2002). Some of the existing street gangs moved to control the economic opportunities on their local turf, taking 'dues' from traders in the local markets, owners of petrol stations and corner shops; and controlling small-scale prostitution and the local drug trade, while medium and large business became areas of interest for older 'predators'.

The raging battles for control and regulation of this street economy affected street youth in a profound way. The whole city territory became a war zone. Street peer groups, already located in a variety of city areas, either had to assert their control over space and expand outwards or risk being swept aside. This is when the turf wars suddenly intensified and new processes of street organization were launched. In the process of dividing and re-dividing the territory, the gangs were involved in serious violence. The worst time came in the 1980s and early 1990s. In our interviews, gang members typically characterised this period as a time of lawlessness (*bespredel*). Brute force reigned supreme. Young men would arrive by public transport at the location of the next fight and beat up anybody they believed to be a local gang member.

Having established their borders, the gangs could then enjoy the fruits of peace and strive to prevent unnecessary conflict. As thirty-five year old Il'nar, who joined a street gang in the middle of the 1980s, described it:

> I think that the most important stage in the life of our gang was when the division of the territory, the asphalt wars, stopped. This was somewhere in the beginning of the 1990s. Until then, fights were very dangerous, people were using metal sticks to beat each other to death, using bricks to finish their enemies off. The score was not so much how many lads were beaten up on each side, but how many were killed.

In 1992, the gangs came to an agreement known as 'we don't divide up the asphalt' (Salagaev, 2005; Salagaev *et al.*, 2005). From this time onwards, the war for territory subsided, and with it the threat of serious violence. Most disagreements were settled at meetings. Gangs divided their spheres of economic influence and became key players in local illegal markets.

Tadjik, a gang member, put this in a simple and clear way: 'Our history is the same as anyone else's. There was a group of *lad*s who were close friends, other *lad*s assembled around them, they sorted out the territorial borders and began to make money'.

Il'nar's description of what it takes these days to have authority on the streets emphasises the following qualities of a 'violent entrepreneur':

> . . . You have to spend a lot of time working on yourself. First off, you have to overcome your fear – a *lad* shouldn't be scared of anyone, not cops, not

prison, not enemies. After that, a *lad*'s got to make sure he's always in touch with what's going on, that he's keeping his seniors informed and doesn't go too long without touching base with them. Then you've got to have a head on your shoulders so you can think and work things out for yourself. And, most importantly, you need your own patch to live off. That matters more than anything else.

The gang became a violent enterprise, a cohesive and disciplined unit, mobilised to extract economic value from territorial control.

The gang as a ruling regime

By the mid 1990s, following the period of gang wars and division of territory, the local gangs managed to establish domination of their local areas and form what I would call autonomous *ruling regimes*. The gangs put other participants in street space, such as small businessmen (*komersy*) who began to operate in its illegal and semi-legal spheres (the owners of local kiosks, market stalls, small parking lots, street sex workers etc.), as well as non-gang young people, into a variety of situations of dependency.

By virtue of their largely unprotected status on the street and in the informal economy, all these people were particularly vulnerable to coercive subjugation. People involved in small business and street-level economic activity became the objects of exploitation by the gangs, having to pay dues (although in their turn the gangs helped them to resolve business disputes and conflicts with other agents of violence). Young people who were not gang members were victimised on the streets, bullied verbally or relieved of their money or mobile phones. While older age cohorts were mostly involved in the violent control of the street economy, the younger guys took 'rent' from their non-gang peers. The subordinate position of the latter was symbolised by their nomination as *lokhs*, which in the old Russian criminal slang meant a peasant, a commoner (Chalidze, 1977).

The gang achieved complete supremacy in the space of the streets and made it very difficult for local young men to remain separate from it. As one of our informants, twenty-six year old Ispug, said, 'not being from *the street* [the gang], I found it difficult to defend my right to live as I wanted, and that is why I decided that it would make sense to join the gang'. As Il'nar said: 'It used to be like this here: you are either a member of the gang, or you are constantly being chased, being harassed . . . That is why there was not much choice.'

The choice between membership and non-membership was that between a constant risk to personal security and the shame of being a dominated 'commoner', or the relative security and pride of being associated with the local overlords. While criminal opportunities attracted some of the members, many young people joined the gang without any intention to commit criminal or violent acts. We were told that sometimes parents gave money to their children

to pay into the group's fund (a duty of every member). Thus they avoided the victimisation which they would have experienced if they had not joined and could also build important contacts which would be useful in their adult life. Parental support also meant that young people did not have to commit crime in order to find the money to pay into the gang's fund.

The gangs did not simply exploit local resources. They became involved in the process of social regulation in the neighbourhoods. Local residents came to the gang in cases of conflict with gang members from other territories. They could ask for assistance with solving problems with other 'streets', or help to find a stolen car. As it was commonly considered that it was not worth going to the police, who were likely to be very slow in their investigation or do nothing at all, it could be easier for victims of crime to go to gang members and ask for help. Local businessmen could ask gang members for help in solving their problems: if their businesses were 'protected' by the gang, the gang provided help as they had an interest in the prosperity of the business.

In interviews, local residents agreed that the gangs brought certain benefits for the city in limiting lawlessness (*bespredel*). Airat, an eighteen year old local resident and not a gang member, told us:

> I would say that the gangs do not like *bespredel*. If the gangs did not exist, there would be more violence and *bespredel*. If there were no organized criminal groups, people would still do what these groups do. But the gang members at least control the situation somewhat, and do not let others commit certain acts, for example, mug, rob and beat up pensioners.

The gangs developed a strict system of internal discipline, leadership structures, age cohorts, controls through regular meetings and entry and exit rituals. The identities and self-presentation of gang members in their relations with the outside world aim to sustain the gang's status as that of elite military unit, executing control and command over their territory. The gangs' rules limit unnecessary violence (including victimisation of young children, women and old people) and encourage verbal instead of physical intimidation of victims (Salagaev and Shashkin, 2002; Stephenson, 2006). Gang members are not allowed to take drugs (although they often control street drug distribution), or drink heavily. Unlike the *bandits* described in Volkov's *Violent Entrepreneurs* (2002), these neighbourhood groups have tight links with the local communities, and this produces specific normative codes and practices.

The gangs are not the only wielders of power in urban areas. Although in the space of the street their control can be almost absolute, there are other power agencies and structures operating in the territory – the federal and regional authorities, the police and the schools, as well as the adult mafia. The gangs are a part of, one can argue, a regime of 'fractured sovereignty' at the local territory.

Our research in Kazan has shown that gangs co-exist with a variety of power institutions in the local territory (police, mafia, gangs, schools, local

authorities), and have achieved a certain accommodation with them. For example, the representatives of law and order are hardly loved by gang members, but they are considered to be part of the wider social order, which on the whole is accepted as legitimate and necessary. As 25-year old Tsigan said, 'the police, although they have a bad reputation, are doing their work too. If they did not exist, there would be complete lawlessness.' The gangs have managed to establish a regime of more or less peaceful coexistence with the police: they are interested in stable conditions for business and well-being for their members, while the police see them as an instrument for maintaining order in the territory. Although individual gang members are sometimes prosecuted for theft, extortion or robbery, the police use their contacts with *avtoritety* in order to make them control their members and reduce violent crime. The head of the investigative department of a police precinct said that:

> In the gang structure, all contact between the youths and the seniors happens through supervisors, ie those who control each age group in the gang. We use the same idea ourselves, so that for example when the juniors start to play around and create problems and misunderstandings, I just call the supervisor and say: 'you've got this, that and the other going on, deal with the problem!' If it doesn't work, we call an even more senior overseer and tell him about it. Usually, that's enough.

The gang funds are sometimes used to make donations to the district police departments (either through the accounts of their registered firms or in cash). The gangs have also established a system of accommodation with the adult mafia: while the street gang rules over the street economic opportunities and resolves local conflicts, the mafia is involved in the serious business of trafficking, weapon and drug trade, money laundering, gambling, and taking protection money from medium and large businesses (cf.: Varese, 2001). The gangs participate in local life – for example, sometimes *avtoritety* (especially those who are involved with the local administrations or want to make a political career) help build mosques and sports centres.

The gang as a product of the local community

The gang is a social form embedded in the community. Gang members do not belong to an 'oppositional' subculture isolated from the rest of the community and espousing different values and norms. Although the gang is a relatively closed society which puts its interests and the interests of its members above everything else, this does not mean that young people are separated from the life that goes on outside their street or district, and which is not connected to their group interests. While being members of the dominant group in their territory, in their other lives they play the roles of children, students, employees and so on. While creating autonomous systems of power, they can at the

same time play by the rules set by the institutions of the wider social and political order. According to young people (and this was confirmed by teachers as well), members of Kazan gangs try not to attract unnecessary attention at schools and colleges. They do not play truant and try not to let the teachers know what they do outside school (although their classmates know about their gang membership, and the teachers claim that they can identify gang members by their mannerisms, walk, gestures etc). Money from racketeering provides a relatively low income to those gang members who do not belong to the ruling strata (*avtoritety*), and many also have permanent or temporary employment – at a car park, construction site, in a garage and so on. Most of the gang members, at around the age of 25, leave the gang to find employment in the mainstream economy (with a minority joining the ranks of adult organised crime).

The social composition of the Kazan gangs also reflects their status as neighbourhood institutions. Unlike the socially and racially homogenous gangs in the United States (Adamson, 2000: 272), here we find socially and ethnically mixed groups. Gang members come from a variety of social and class back-grounds, and are not necessarily affected by 'standard' predictors of delin-quency such as lone parenthood, parental unemployment or alcoholism (but they tend to live in Soviet-era housing estates rather than in new residential quarters built for the rich). Most members are Russians and Tatars, but there may be Armenians, Georgians or Jews among others. As Tsigan put it, 'I guess it's only the representatives of African nations that can't join us, and even then not because of their race, but because they would stand out too much, and we don't need that.' They have no racist or nationalist agendas, and they dislike skinheads who are seen as being involved in *bespredel*: being violent for violence's sake and with no regard either for society's laws or for the *lads*' normative codes. At the same time, their main allegiance is to the gang; they do not join youth subcultural groups such as football fans or rappers.

The status of the gang as a local institution, tightly linked with the neigh-bourhood, is reflected in its violent practices. Affective, non-instrumental meanings of violence, which Jack Katz (1988: 138) sees as playing a key role in the daily practices of the street gang, are far from prominent for the gangs in Kazan. On the contrary, gang members are careful with their dispensation of violence. Apart from members of 'enemy' gangs, the local territory is open to everybody. There is no practice of beating people up just for wandering into a group's street. According to a representative of Kazan police, 'With the gang members it hardly ever happens that someone on the street gets picked on just because he has unusual clothes, because he doesn't look like everyone else. Our *lads* don't need those sorts of problems'. Of course, episodic expressive violence may be necessary to establish a terrifying regime on the street so that non-gang members respect the *lads*. Also, some of the membership (particu-larly younger *lads*) may be prone to violence or eager to demonstrate their masculine vigour and bravery to the other members of the group. Punishment of disobedient businessmen or rivals can require the actual use of physical

violence. Bad business on some of the *streets* means that gang members might start to look to neighbouring territories for business opportunities. As a result, conflict can flare up, and normal routines become disrupted.

Of course, the gang is a violent institution, and its presence in the community is a source of fear and insecurity. Nevertheless, the gangs are not some alien force, but part of the local social regulation, which is reflected in the practices and identities of their members.

The current transformation of the gangs

While the history of the Kazan gangs discussed so far has been the history of their greater institutionalisation in the local community and an increase in their power, the process is not irreversible. As time passed and the economic and political situation in Russia stabilised, the state re-asserted its sovereignty. With the strengthening of the Russian state, the need for informal social regulation became weaker (Volkov, 2002). As local residents told us, it is now easier for businesses to go to the police to get protection and not to have dealings with the gangs. Also, the criminal economy cannot feed every entrant, as all the criminal opportunities are already divided up. Gang membership, according to representatives of Kazan police, has started to decrease since the beginning of the 2000s, and this process goes on to this day. 'Young people don't want to work for nothing, just to keep the gang going. If by the age of 18 they don't see business opportunities and a chance to get good income, they move away from the gangs and start working in legal jobs. The gang is affected by the process of social differentiation. As *avtoritety* become millionaires (and even high-ranking government officials) and the rank-and-file struggle to get their piece of the pie, internal tensions can flare up. Twenty-three year old Koshmar is disappointed in his gang and wants to leave it:

> I used to have the illusion that the group existed so that the members could solve their problems, protect their interests, but now I have come to the conclusion that this is all a deception, that the older members just use the youngsters for their own purposes, to collect the joint fund, to get money from the tradesmen, just use us as ordinary soldiers, as brute force. The aim of the group is really the wellbeing of the leaders.

The times are changing. Discipline is weakening. Members are not punished for drinking or smoking dope any more. Recruitment rules have changed – the tests for applicants have been abandoned. No compulsion to join exists anymore. According to our interviewees, it has become easier to leave a gang – you can buy your way out – and one interviewee explained how he left a gang with the help of a relative in the police who beat those who refused to let him out. *Avtoritety* try to join the elite of the larger society and move into legal business. We were told that *avtoritety* do not want their children to join the

gangs and wanted them to go to universities and into legitimate employment. They even prohibit their children from socialising with young gang members.

The scarcity of illegal resources may also mean that the youth groups themselves are now involved in greater territorial violence, reverting in a sense to an earlier stage of gang development. As twenty-three year old Banan said, 'As there are no real opportunities for making money in our street, our relationships with the neighbours [youth groups from other streets] are bad and our street has acquired a reputation for *bespredel*, because we fight constantly'. Fighting with other territorial groups represents 'fun', which, according to him, is the main rationale for the group's existence. 'We do not have any other aims apart from having fun because the street is very poor and all that is left for us is to have fun with empty pockets'. The end of the gang order can in fact mean greater violence on the ground.[6]

In Kazan itself the power has shifted from gang to police. The incentives for joining the gang are disappearing: it is now more dangerous to be a gang member than a non-member. With the state reasserting itself as the 'Leviathan', the gang sovereign role is becoming history.

Conclusion

We have seen that the gang's social organization is highly sensitive to external social conditions. The stages of transformation of the Kazan gangs reflect the changes in the macro-context of the Russian social order. Rapid urbanisation, followed by crisis and collapse of the Soviet centralised economy, followed by 1990s lawlessness, and then the period of economic recovery and stabilisation at the end of the 1990s–2000 all led to significant changes in the structures of street social organization and in young people's identities and practices. From disorganised peer groups, youth street organizations moved to becoming urban territorial elites, and then violent entrepreneurs and autonomous ruling regimes. The transformation I describe relates to the gang as an institution, not to specific gangs that can be short-lived and volatile. It is also important to note that different organizational types can exist in parallel, and that even at the height of the social organization of the Kazan gangs – when they achieved significant control over the local street economy and local community – they coexisted with more traditional peer groups involved in episodic fights and campaigns for 'respect'. We must therefore be careful not to reify the gang and identify different types of youth organization that are presented (and present themselves) under the gang banner (Sullivan, 2005).

The structure of the gang, its practices of violence and the targets of violent control are the products of specific power deficits emerging in a given place at a given time. Although more research is needed into the specific conditions producing the Kazan-type hierarchical entrepreneurial street gangs, by the end of the 1980s–1990s, such gangs were ubiquitous not just in Kazan but in many Russian cities (Ulan-Ude, Ioshkar-Ola, Ul'ianovsk, Naberezhnye

Chelny, Cheliabinsk, Cheboksary and Petrozavodsk) and in the suburbs of Moscow and St.Petersburg. In many other places, however, street territory has been largely divided between peer networks, territorial elites and youth sub-cultural groups (with individual youth criminal groups that did not, however, rise to the status of joint rulers of the streets) (Prozumentov, 1993; Pilkington, 1994; Omel'chenko, 1996; Karbainov, 2003; Gromov, 2009).[7]

The gangs need to be seen not as ahistorical and pathological forces of destruction, the 'malicious other' (Rawlinson, 2009), but as historical agents, brought to life by the weaknesses of the macro-regulatory structures. Also, in the process of a gang's self-organization and as a result of its power-sharing relations with other agencies and structures, physical violence can lose its currency in day-to-day life and violence instead can assume more ritualised and verbal forms. Ultimately, however, it is state-level and even global pro-cesses that precipitate violent street-level organization, and they can also lead to the subsidence of violence.

The value of this case study is to demonstrate how, in a situation of social breakdown, grass-root gangs may mobilise to 'solve' the problem of order. By creating internal structures of command and authority and building a secure base in the space of the streets, they can stop being under constant threat of violence. Having 'resolved' the problem of violence for themselves (although violence of course can never be truly resolved), they can move to establish a system of domination and form an autonomous ruling regime in the territory. While exercising control over street territory, they also become part of the network of sources of power in a variety of domains of social life. They are part of the system of fractured authority which characterises many societies where the nation-state has lost its legitimate monopoly of the means of violence (Castells, 1997: 343). At the same time, the presence of informal co-operation between organised gangs and the different state and non-state power institu-tions that we found in Russian street space is quite striking and points to significant structural differences from the situation in the US and increasingly the UK, where the key state response to gang activities has been gang sup-pression programmes (Hallsworth, 2011).

As time went on, the Russian state consolidated its power, and the rules of the game became clearer (Volkov, 2002). Unscrupulous businessmen, mafia or street gangs did not disappear, but the spectre of complete disorder and an imminent threat of violence has on the whole faded away. With greater stability in Russian society, the strengthening of state sovereignty and the reduction of risk in everyday life, including the space of the streets, many gangs disappeared.[8] In many areas of Kazan, instead of becoming 'violent entrepreneurs', young people now join local street peer groups. They organise ritual battles, attack members of youth subcultural groups and tell each other stories of the heroic past of their older comrades who once ruled the city.

Whether the new order will survive future economic constraints or political chaos we do not know, but the tradition of the gangs seems to ensure that

should state sovereignty weaken again, one could reasonably predict a rebirth of gang life and gang power in response.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1 Ul'ianovsk, Naberezhnye Chelny, Tyumen, Volgograd, Lyubertsy and many other places (Omel'chenko, 1996; Pilkington, 2002; Gromov, 2006).
2 The Kazan gangs comprise young people from the age of 13–14, and the oldest members may be 50 or so years of age. However, the older members either become the group's ruling stratum (*avtoritety*), with serious business interests (both in the illegal and progressively legal economy) and move away from the group's everyday activities, or stop being active members of the gang and preserve only episodic social contacts with their former associates. In this analysis I am mainly looking at the social practices of the core of gang membership, aged 17–25.
3 The idea of a gang as a symbolic nation was suggested by Jack Katz (1988).
4 http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2005/06/6f668e1d-53f3-4d85-8cb6-9603a8204128.html
5 This was mainly a result of incomes from the oil industry and the special regime of subventions from Moscow (http://atlas.socpol.ru/portraits/tatar.shtml).
6 As Katz has argued, gangs may work to reduce violence as they, inter alia, 'draw a variety of violent youth into relatively disciplined relations' (2004: 117). And, as Pilkington also notes, the progression of the Russian *gopniki* (a name often used for members of violent street peer networks) into more serious crime, such as protection rackets and drug trade, made the city streets safer (2002: 125).
7 The system of gang power described here is also very different from that recently 'discovered' in the village of Kushchevskaya – a subject of a belated criminal investigation directed from Moscow, provoked by the murder of 11 people. In this village in the Krasnodar region, a criminal gang acquired total power over residents, whom it could deprive of their land, rob, rape and kill with impunity, while the regional authorities turned a blind eye (Golosov, 2010).
8 Towards the end of the 1990s, Kazan became a prosperous global city. Thanks to the region's natural resources – especially oil and gas – and developed economic infrastructure, it became the third richest city in the Russian Federation.

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