

Crime and Corruption in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia

Abstract

This paper analyzes state terror, organized crime, and corruption during the Soviet period from 1917 to 1991 and during the reign of the first Russian President Boris Yeltsin from 1991-1999. This helps to better understand the prerequisites for the formation of the modern Russian state under the leadership of Vladimir Putin. Today various researchers consider the Russian Federation as a mafia, criminal, or gangster state. The article helps to understand that Putinism did not arise out of nowhere, but is rooted in the Soviet and post-Soviet past.

Discussion of issues of state terrorism, organized crime and corruption during the Soviet era was limited and information was controlled. The extent of these problems became more apparent after the collapse of the USSR in December 1991, when archives were opened and scientists gained greater access to previously classified information. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, some of these problems persisted in the post-Soviet states, and only in the Baltic states and Georgia did positive changes occur. Today corruption and crime remain particularly important problems in the Russian Federation.

Key words: Russian Federation, Corruption, Organized Crime, Terrorist State, Democratization.

Authors:

Alexandre Kukhianidze

Professor, Department of Political Science, Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University

Email: alexandre.kukhianidze@tsu.ge

Nino Kukhianidze

Invited lecture, School of Social Sciences, The University of Georgia

Email: nin_kukhianidze@yahoo.com

Introduction

This paper analyzes state terror, organized crime, and corruption during the Soviet period from 1917 to 1991 and during the reign of the first Russian President Boris Yeltsin from 1991 to 1999. This helps to better understand the prerequisites for the formation of the modern Russian state under the leadership of Vladimir Putin. Today various researchers consider the Russian Federation as a mafia, criminal, or gangster state, or even *Ruscism* as a form of Russian fascism. The article helps to understand that modern Russia did not arise out of nowhere, but is rooted in the Soviet and post-Soviet past.

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Research objectives:

1. Understand and explain the preconditions that contribute to maintaining high levels of corruption and organized crime in modern Russia;
2. To gain a deeper understanding of the causes and consequences of state terror, organized crime, and corruption in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia.
3. Determine the similarities and differences in the state of crime and corruption in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia.

Methods used:

The author used secondary data analysis, and official documents, such as government and international reports, legal documents, court records, crime databases, and policy papers, to explore trends and patterns related to state terrorism, organized crime, and corruption. Analysis of media reports, social media content, and other publicly available information was used to identify developments and public perceptions of organized crime and corruption. The analysis examined the connections and relationships between individuals and organizations and revealed the hidden structures and dynamics of actors involved in state terrorism, organized

crime, or corruption. Examining historical records and events was useful to shed light on the roots and evolution of state terrorism, organized crime, and corruption in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia.

Crime and Corruption in Soviet Russia

State terror in Russia in 1917-1953

The period from the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 to Joseph Stalin's death in 1953 in Soviet Russia was marked by significant political turmoil and the consolidation of power under the Bolsheviks, led by figures like Vladimir Lenin, Leon Trotsky, and Joseph Stalin. During this time, there were numerous instances of state terror, political repression, and human rights abuses. The Red Terror (Постановление СНК РСФСР о «красном терроре», 5 сентября 1918 г.) was a campaign of mass killings, executions, and arrests carried out by the Bolshevik government to suppress opposition and consolidate their power during and after the Russian Civil War in 1917-1923 (Melgunoff, S., 1927). The Cheka, the Soviet secret police, played a central role in these repressive measures. Thousands of perceived enemies of the state were executed or imprisoned. Great Purge (1936-1938), also known as the Great Terror this period saw widespread purges within the Communist Party, military, and society at large (Явлинский, Г., 2017). Joseph Stalin launched a campaign to eliminate perceived political rivals and anyone suspected of disloyalty. Millions of people were arrested, and many were executed or sent to labor camps, including the infamous Gulag system (История сталинского Гулага, 2004).

The Holodomor (1932-1933) was a man-made famine in Ukraine, primarily caused by Soviet policies such as grain requisitioning and forced collectivization of agriculture. Millions of Ukrainians died from starvation during this period. Some historians consider it a deliberate act of genocide by the Soviet government. Today the Holodomor is recognized as the genocide of the Ukrainian nation (Holodomor History, 2023).

The Soviet government conducted extensive campaigns to suppress religious institutions and practices, especially in 1917-1939 (Dyachenko, A., 2022). Many churches, monasteries, and religious leaders were persecuted, and religious freedoms were severely restricted.

The Soviet judiciary staged highly publicized show trials of political opponents, where confessions were often extracted through torture or threats to family members (Galushko, A., 2016). Even prominent Bolshevik leaders, such as Bukharin, Zinoviev, and Kamenev, were among those subjected to such trials. (Report of Court Proceedings, 1936). The Soviet regime tightly controlled the media and imposed strict censorship. Propaganda was used to promote the Communist Party's ideology and suppress dissent.

It's important to note that these policies and actions were not constant throughout the entire period from 1917 to 1953, and there were fluctuations in the level of repression and terror. Additionally, the scale and impact of state terror in Soviet Russia remain subjects of historical debate, with varying estimates of the number of victims. However, there is a consensus among historians that this period was characterized by state terror, significant state-led repression, and human rights abuses. The Soviet Union operated a vast network of forced labor camps known as Gulag, where political prisoners, criminals, and other "enemies of the people" were sent to perform grueling labor in harsh conditions (Applebaum, A., 2003). Countless individuals perished in these camps due to starvation, torture, and brutality.

The role of organized crime in the Gulag system

On April 15, 1919, the Bolsheviks issued a decree "On forced labor camps," which marked the beginning of the creation of the Gulag - the Main Directorate of Forced Labor Camps (Постановление ВЦИК о лагерях принудительных работ, 1919 г.). It was aimed at isolation "undesirable" elements and enforcing them to conscious labor through re-education and coercion. Organized crime played a complex and multifaceted role within the Soviet Gulag system. While the Soviet government vehemently opposed criminal activity, it also fostered an environment in which organized crime could flourish within the Gulag system, bringing together a diverse group of prisoners, including political dissidents and common criminals. In this environment, professional criminal groups were formed for self-preservation and protection. These groups often had their own hierarchies, codes of conduct, and systems of control.

Some criminal leaders within the Gulag system collaborated with camp authorities to maintain order and discipline among prisoners. In exchange for their cooperation, these criminal leaders received privileges and leniency from the authorities. These relationships included informing

criminal prisoners about actions against political prisoners or helping quell potential uprisings. Organized crime elements within the Gulag often preyed on weaker or more vulnerable inmates, including political prisoners. They could use violence to enforce their demands. Criminal groups controlled various underground economies within the Gulag, including the smuggling of contraband, such as cigarettes, alcohol, and food. They also profited from illegal activities like gambling and prostitution that occurred within the camps. Some criminal leaders bribed or corrupted camp officials to gain access to resources or privileges. This corruption could extend to camp administrators, guards, and other staff members. The presence of organized crime influenced the culture and social dynamics of the Gulag. Criminal slang, rituals, and customs became part of the camp experience, impacting the behavior of both criminal and non-criminal prisoners. The influence of organized crime within the Gulag system had a lasting impact on the post-Soviet criminal underworld. Many criminal leaders and members who survived their time in the camps went on to become prominent figures in post-Soviet organized crime and the underground economy (Vincent, M., 2020).

Criminal leaders or "thieves in law," also known as "vory v zakone" in Russian, played a significant role and were a distinct and influential criminal subculture in the Gulag system (Galeotti, M., 2018). "Thieves in law" often had a distinct role in dealing with political prisoners, sometimes acting as informants for camp authorities and helping to maintain control over the inmate population. They often clashed with political prisoners who were imprisoned for their opposition to the Soviet regime. These clashes sometimes resulted in violence and tensions within the camps. The Institute of "thieves in law" was a secretive and hierarchical criminal organization in the Soviet Union and later in post-Soviet states. "Thieves in law" had connections and influence outside the prison system, including within the Soviet bureaucracy and criminal underworld. This allowed them to engage in corruption, such as bribing guards, camp officials, and soviet and party nomenclature which provided them with privileges and better living conditions not only in the harsh environment of the Gulag but also in the Soviet system. It's important to note that while "thieves in law" had a significant presence within the Gulag system, not all inmates were part of this criminal organization, and their influence varied from one camp to another. Both the Gulag and the whole Soviet society were a complex and multifaceted system, and the role of the "thieves in law" was just one aspect of its intricate social dynamics. The Soviet penal system, including the infamous Gulag, was rife with corruption. Camp officials and guards exploited prisoners for personal gain, engaging in theft, extortion, and abuse.

Hooliganism as part of Soviet youth subculture

The socio-cultural aspects of hooliganism can be traced back to the early twentieth century in the context of the Russian Empire (Neuberger, J. 1993). Since the 1920s, hooliganism has become part of the Soviet youth subculture (Sidorchuk I.V. 2018), especially in the end of the Second World War, and in the second half of the twentieth century (late 1970s and 1980s). Economic problems and lack of freedoms, the traditional generational conflict, and in the later Soviet period, disappointment in communist values and Westernization contributed to the emergence of protest sentiments among young people and the further spread of this subculture.

If the Soviet Union, under the leadership of Joseph Stalin, maintained strict control over its citizens and any manifestation of rebellious tendencies among young people was punishable by death or the Gulag, then after the death of the dictator, this control weakened and young people began to strive to go beyond ideological boundaries and restrictions on freedoms, striving for individual self-expression, including in the form of a hooligan subculture.

There were significant generational tensions between the older generation that had experienced the Great Terror of 1937 and World War II and the younger generation born after the war. The older generation tended to adhere more closely to traditional Soviet values, while the younger generation sought new forms of self-expression and identity. Many young people in the Soviet Union grew disillusioned with the rigid and repressive nature of the regime, which limited their personal freedoms and opportunities for self-expression. This discontentment sometimes manifested in acts of hooliganism as a form of protest.

In the 1980s, the Soviet Union faced low oil prices and sharply worsening economic problems. Basic food products disappeared from store shelves, and restrictions were introduced on some of them in the form of a rationing system. The decline in the standard of living of the population of the Soviet Union led to increased discontent among young people and an increase in petty crime, drug addiction, vandalism, and violent behavior.

Western culture, particularly through music, fashion, and cinema, had a significant influence on Soviet youth culture. Rock music and Western fashion trends were seen as symbols of rebellion and non-conformity, which attracted many young people. Some young people

adopted rebellious attitudes and styles influenced by Western subcultures, which occasionally led to confrontations with communist authorities.

Hooliganism often emerged as a form of peer group behavior. Young people formed gangs or groups as a way to establish their own identities and to challenge authority. Alcoholism and drug abuse were also prevalent issues among the Soviet Russian youth. Substance abuse could lead to reckless and antisocial behavior, contributing to hooliganism which in the Soviet context manifested in various forms, including vandalism, street fighting, and petty crime. For the elder generation, hooligans were often associated with punk and rock subcultures which used Western music and fashion to distinguish themselves from mainstream society.

In response to the rise in hooliganism, Soviet authorities began to take measures such as propaganda campaigns against hooliganism in the form of satirical magazines and films, administrative punishment in the form of influence through schools and universities, Komsomol and party organizations, or criminal prosecution in the form of arrest and imprisonment.

Despite these efforts to control hooliganism, it persisted as a form of youthful rebellion throughout the latter years of the Soviet Union. It represented a challenge to the rigid conformity and ideological control imposed by the state, and it reflected the desire of many young Soviets for greater personal freedom and self-expression.

Corruption in the Soviet System

Corruption was a problem throughout the history of the Soviet Union, from Stalin's era to Gorbachev's leadership. While communist leaders recognized the issue and took some steps to address it, it remained deeply entrenched within the Soviet system due to the lack of transparency, centralized control, and the absence of mechanisms for holding high-ranking officials accountable.

Under Stalin, the terror of the Bolshevik state was expressed in mass arrests, which turned into a system of suppression not only of political opponents and dissidents but also into a machine for the destruction of Stalin's potential competitors. The example of the murder of Leon Trotsky and many other famous Bolshevik leaders shows that the basis of the totalitarian Bolshevik

system was a terrorist state, imposing on people fear and unquestioning submission to the will of the dictator. Periodic purges in the ranks of the army, intelligence services, and the party were accompanied by arrests of high-ranking leaders of the party and state, torture in order to fabricate criminal cases brought against them, and show trials in which the victims of this terror were accused of espionage, attempted coups and were branded as enemies of the people. The people watched this silently and indifferently. The so-called “new Soviet man” was in fact not a free citizen of his country, but a subject of his dictator. This type of behavior can be clearly seen in Russia in the first two decades of the twenty-first century.

Stalin and his inner circle engaged in nepotism and cronyism, favoring loyalists and family members in key positions. This not only weakened the meritocracy within the Soviet government but also encouraged corruption as those in power used their positions for personal gain.

Corruption was an increasing issue in Soviet society from Stalin’s death in March 1953 to the end of the Soviet Union in December 1991. While the Soviet government officially promoted the idea of a classless and corruption-free society, in reality, corruption was widespread at various levels of society and within the government itself.

The scale of corruption in the Soviet Union began to grow rapidly after the death of Stalin and after Nikita Khrushchev's criticism of Stalin's cult of personality at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in 1956. After the Central Committee of the CPSU and the Council of Ministers of the USSR adopted the resolution “On the development of housing construction in the USSR” on July 31, 1957 (See: Коммунист, 2023), new favorable circumstances emerged for the development of corruption in the country. The peak of housing construction occurred in 1960 and since that time corruption in the construction industry sector began to acquire enormous proportions. Theft of construction materials, fictitious employment for the purpose of embezzlement of funds, and other corruption crimes became common practice. The situation was similar in other sectors of the Soviet economy. It can be assumed that the collapse of the Soviet system began after the death of Stalin, not only after Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika. It began with the rapid spread of corruption crimes in the country. Corruption extended beyond civil servants and law enforcement officials. Ordinary citizens also used the services of corrupt officials to obtain benefits at the expense of the state. However, corruption eroded trust in the Communist Party and the Soviet government,

undermining the legitimacy of the Soviet regime. The state tried to prosecute some officials, but over the years, corruption grew more and more, as it was rooted in the Soviet system itself. The corruption mentality has proven to be quite persistent in modern Russia.

The Soviet economy had a thriving black market and shadow economy where goods and services were traded outside of the state-controlled system. This provided fertile ground for corruption, as individuals often needed connections or bribes to access scarce or highly sought-after items. The scarcity of goods and resources in the Soviet Union led to the emergence of a black market and a shadow economy. Party officials and bureaucrats often participated in these illegal activities, benefiting from the trade in scarce goods.

Nepotism and cronyism were also common in Soviet society. Party officials and bureaucrats often favored friends and family members when it came to job appointments, promotions, and other benefits. This undermined the principles of meritocracy and equality that the Soviet system claimed to uphold.

Corruption extended to law enforcement agencies as well. Police officers were known to take bribes to overlook criminal activities or to release individuals from custody. This compromised the effectiveness of the criminal justice system.

Centralized economic planning in the Soviet Union created opportunities for corruption as officials could manipulate data and resources to meet their quotas and gain personal advantages. This contributed to inefficiencies in the economy.

High-ranking Soviet and Communist Party officials enjoyed privileges such as better housing, healthcare, and consumer goods which were usually facilitated by corruption and connections. Such privileges were not available to the general population.

Corruption seriously worsened the state of the Soviet economy. Facing economic problems and the growing dissatisfaction of the Soviet people with the way of life in the USSR, Mikhail Gorbachev attempted to implement the policies of openness and restructuring but received instead an increase in corruption and the collapse of the USSR.

Democratization and criminalization in post-Soviet Russia (1991-1999)

Democratization versus criminalization

Democratization is about expanding political rights and participation, upholding human rights and the rule of law in a society, and strengthening democratic institutions. Criminalization, on the other hand, is about defining and regulating behaviors that are considered illegal and subjecting those who engage in such behaviors to legal consequences. These concepts are mutually exclusive but can coexist within a democratic society where laws are established through democratic processes and enforced in accordance with the rule of law. "Democratization" and "criminalization" are two distinct concepts that refer to different aspects of governance and social order.

Democratization in Boris Yeltsin's Russia

During the reign of democratically elected Russian President Boris Yeltsin from 1991 to 1999, a multi-party system was created in Russia and the process of democratization began but the transition from a single-party to a multi-party and pluralistic system was very difficult and controversial.

The constitutional crisis of 1992-1993 had a serious impact on the democratic future of Russia. As a result of the crisis, Boris Yeltsin and his associates won the struggle for power. After the end of the crisis, Russia received a new Constitution and Parliament - the Federal Assembly, and the majority of seats in the lower house (State Duma) were won by representatives of liberal and democratic forces. The "communist revenge" through democratic parliamentary elections failed (Румянцев, О.Г., 1993). Yeltsin's government pursued market-oriented economic reforms in the 1990s, known as "shock therapy" or "economic liberalization." These reforms aimed to transition Russia from a centrally planned economy to a market-based system. While they led to some economic growth and privatization, they also caused significant hardships for many Russians.

On July 3, 1996, Russian President Boris Yeltsin was re-elected to a second term, defeating the candidate from the left opposition, Gennady Zyuganov, in the second round. The

presidential elections were competitive and the most democratic in Russian history. In 1996, voters were not ready to see communists again at the head of the country, since the Soviet Union was associated, first of all, with a shortage of goods. There were two alternatives - the Communist Party or Boris Yeltsin and his team. The campaign in support of Yeltsin was conducted in American style. After processing the ballots, Yeltsin was ahead of Zyuganov by 13.5% - 53.8% against 40.3% of the votes (Окунев, Д., 03 июля 2019 г.). Despite the move toward democracy, Russia faced numerous challenges during this period. Corruption, economic instability, and a lack of strong democratic institutions hindered the development of a robust democracy. The transition to a market economy led to economic hardships for many Russians, contributing to social discontent. In November 1996, Yeltsin underwent complex heart surgery and, after holding power for three and a half years, announced his resignation on December 31, 1999, entrusting the duties of the president to Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. This marked the end of Yeltsin's presidency and the beginning of Putin's rule, which ultimately led him to usurp power and retreat from democratic reforms. In summary, the period of democratization in Boris Yeltsin's Russia from 1991 to 1999 witnessed significant political and economic changes. While there were strides towards political pluralism and democratic institutions, there were also numerous challenges and controversies, and the subsequent era under Vladimir Putin would see a different trajectory for Russian society.

Criminalization in Boris Yeltsin's Russia

During the transition from a centrally planned economy to a market system, there was significant economic instability in Russia, resulting in high levels of unemployment and poverty. In the 1990s, new organized crime groups emerged, such as Orekhovskaya, Baumanskaya, Izmailovskaya, Koptevskaya, Shchelkovskaya, and Solntsevskaya in Moscow, (Званцев, В., 2018) as well as Tambovskaya in St. Petersburg (Бондарева, А., 2013). There were also many other organized crime groups operating in Russian provinces, including the powerful and dangerous “Tver Wolves” in Tver, “Podolskaya” in Podolsk, “Volgovskaya” in Tolyatti, and “Slonovskaya” in Ryazan. These groups were created between the late 1980s and the first half of the 1990s and committed gangster-style violent crimes. They did not follow the unwritten code of “thieves in law” and were known for their extreme cruelty when committing crimes such as racketeering, smuggling in drugs and weapons, trafficking, extortion, money laundering, and contract killings. As they had connections with law enforcement agencies, politicians, and business people, it was difficult to combat their influence. Corruption was

widespread in the Russian government, and officials often facilitated organized crime, which contributed to a culture of lawlessness in the country.

During Boris Yeltsin's presidency, criminalization was a significant and complex issue that plagued the country. The early 1990s saw a period of economic upheaval in Russia as it marked a turbulent transition from a centrally planned economy to a market-based system, and it brought about significant social and economic changes, some of which contributed to the rise of criminal activities. The rapid and often chaotic privatization of state-owned assets created opportunities for corruption and illicit financial activities. The so-called "oligarchs" emerged during this period, becoming extremely wealthy and powerful, often through questionable means. Many oligarchs had close ties to the Yeltsin administration and used their wealth and power to influence politics. This blurred the lines between business and politics and allowed some oligarchs to act with impunity, contributing to a sense of lawlessness.

Criminal capture of state resources in Boris Yeltsin's Russia

During the 1990s, there were numerous cases of corrupt seizure of state resources by various individuals, groups, and criminal organizations, called oligarchic privatization. Voucher privatization was carried out in 1992-1994 and provided for the purchase of state-owned enterprises and their transformation into joint-stock companies. For this purpose, based on the decrees of the President of the Russian Federation Boris Yeltsin "On accelerating the privatization of state and municipal enterprises" (Указ Президента РФ от 29 января 1992 г., № 66) and "On the introduction of a system of privatization checks in the Russian Federation" (Указ Президента РФ от 14 августа 1992 г., № 914), voucher privatization was carried out. Due to economic illiteracy, the bulk of the population did not understand what to do with the vouchers, so they began to sell them to buyers, as a result, the most profitable enterprises in Russia ended up in the hands of corrupt officials, business people, and organized crime groups. This is how Russian oligarchs emerged during the 1990s as major players in the Russian economy. They often acquired these assets at low prices and used their political connections to gain control of key industries, including energy, media, natural resources, and telecommunications. Oligarchs used complex financial schemes and offshore accounts to hide their wealth from Russian authorities and avoid taxes. Money laundering was a common practice. Many oligarchs funded political campaigns and political parties, trying to manipulate

the political system to their advantage and gain considerable sway over governmental decisions.

Conclusions

Terrorism, organized crime, and corruption were significant issues deeply rooted in the Soviet system. The Soviet government was known for its harsh measures to suppress dissent. Political opponents, perceived enemies of the people, and ethnic minorities were often targeted. The Great Purge in the 1930s, led by Joseph Stalin, resulted in mass arrests, executions, and labor camp internments. The Soviet planned economy and strict state control over resources led to the emergence of a vast black market. Organized crime groups, known as "thieves-in-law," operated within this underground economy, engaging in various illegal activities such as smuggling, extortion, and theft. Some organized crime figures had ties to corrupt officials within the Communist Party, which enabled them to operate with relative impunity. Corruption at various levels of government facilitated the growth of organized crime. The Soviet system was rife with nepotism and bureaucratic corruption. Party officials often used their positions to provide benefits to their friends and family, leading to a lack of meritocracy. Corruption was also pervasive in economic planning and resource allocation. Bribes and kickbacks were common, and some state officials used their positions for personal enrichment.

But in post-Soviet Russia corruption and organized crime only increased their influence. Unlike the institution of thieves in law, the newly emerged organized criminal groups used brutal gangster methods when committing crimes and did not comply with the unwritten code of thieves in law.

Organized crime and corruption have had a detrimental effect on Russian society. Putin, who succeeded Yeltsin as president in 1999, has promised to restore law and order in Russia. His administration took a more assertive approach to oligarchs and organized crime, which led to a weakening of their influence on government. But as we now know, President Putin and his inner circle themselves have turned into oligarchs and representatives of a criminal group in power. However, this is a topic for another study.

Thus, the Bolshevik terror, the stable existence of the institution of thieves in law, gangsterism, and the corruption of Soviet and post-Soviet ruling groups were fertile ground for the formation

of the modern Russian state, and the consequences of these events continue to influence Russian politics and society to some extent today.

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