Skinhead Subculture in Lithuania

Abstract

The object of my study is the analysis of Lithuanian skinheads’ identity, this group’s formation and its most characteristic features. Over the research period, 39 different respondents were questioned (investigated) using a semi-structured interview method and the SAL project questionnaire (see Appendix, p. 276). The nationalist skinhead subculture serves as the youth response to such global phenomena as immigration and multi-culturalism or historical multi-ethnicity. The subcultural style of nationalistic skinheads in Lithuania is elaborated due to their specific lifestyle, strong (tough) community solidarity and combativeness, the characteristics developed as solutions to the problems of global change.

Keywords: skinheads, nationalism, racism, subculture, identity, lifestyle

Introduction

Researchers have linked the formation of the skinhead subculture with an objective to re-create a traditional work class community by highlighting and emphasising particular details and values of its image – J. Clarke names this aim, the “magic recovery of community” (Clarke, 1975). The category of social class has lost its importance in later studies. D. Moore notes that ethnicity is becoming a more important idea for the image of Australian skinheads (Moore, 1994). In the context of French skinheads, Y. Petrova maintains that they do not represent a working class any more – the creation of a working class is becoming mythologized and symbolical, and the identity of skinheads is formed from local ideas such as nation, ethnicity, region, city or area (Petrova, 2006). Lithuanian skinhead subculture has taken its shape only circa 1994; therefore, there are no comprehensive studies of this subculture. Has it reached Lithuania in the shape developed in the West? Why has it become a form of self-expression though not a very popular one? To answer these questions, we need to analyse the identity of Lithuanian skinheads, the ways such an identity has developed and its most important features. Thus the object of this study is the analysis of Lithuanian skinheads’ identity, the formation of such a group and its most characteristic features.
Methods
This research includes 24 semi-structured interviews that focus on the respondents’ subcultural identity. One (the first) interview involved a skinhead music band (mainly its leader) on the development of the musical features. I also collected 20 SAL questionnaires of which five were filled in by the respondents who had already been interviewed previously. In total, 39 different respondents were interviewed. The selection of the respondents was carried out using the “snowball” technique.

Results
During the implementation of the SAL Project, I determined that the aspects of style and masculinity that are ascribed to the skinhead subculture by Western researchers are also relevant when talking about Lithuanian skinheads. In Lithuania the ethnic aspect is becoming more prominent than is the working class identity. The analysis of skinheads’ ideology is especially interesting since it revealed that this subculture is not characterised by pure racist or Nazi ideologies – differently from the predominant stereotypes used by the mass media. Further data analysis has identified which factors of the environment stimulate the formation of this subculture in Lithuania, and how the identity of the subculture is maintained.

Discussion and conclusions
The ideas of nationalistic skinheads highlight the main ideology and aims of nationalism: civic autonomy, territorial entity and historical identity. Meanwhile Nazi or fascist ideologies are not typical to this subculture. Nationalistic skinhead “racism” has some characteristic features of nationalism and it has many commonalities with what A. D. Smith describes as the ideology of racial nationalism (Smith, 1994) but it is different from pure racism.

The nationalistic skinhead style first expresses the ideological position of this subculture through the use of nationalistic symbols: the Tricolour (national flag), the Pillars of Gediminas, the Vytis Cross and such. The use of these symbols distinguishes nationalistic skinheads from other branches of skinheads. Moreover, the features of hegemonic masculinity, such as courage, aggressiveness and strength of mind and body, are predominant in the nationalistic skinhead subculture. Strong solidarity, which is usually upheld by physical activity in-common, is also specific to this group.

The identity of a nationalistic skinhead group member is maintained through participation in common group activities: physical activity in-common, organised actions, hikes, concerts, virtual communication or just group member get-togethers and interactions in the bars or elsewhere.
The subculture of nationalistic skinheads can be treated as a response to such global phenomena as immigration and multi-culturalism or historical multi-ethnicity. What consolidates skinheads is the need to defend national dignity, retain ethnic/racial and cultural entity and also to defend one’s political position against counter subcultures. The subcultural style of nationalistic skinheads in Lithuania is re-created in terms of their specific lifestyle, strong community solidarity and combativeness that are selected as solutions to the problems of global changes.

Recommendations for policy makers

Various problems that group members face

In Lithuania skinheads usually mention the problems connected with police officers. Skinheads notice that police officers often judge them on preconceived notions. Police officers arrest skinheads in the streets and ask them to leave public events, even though police officers have no legal right to do so, because skinheads have not broken any laws. Another problem is that police officers are partial and subjective towards skinheads. Skinheads are arrested because of conflicts that happen on the streets, whether these are verbal attacks and/or physical violence.

Regarding educational institutions, school is mentioned most frequently. Group members experience psychological pressure from teachers and administrations because of their subcultural identity. According to skinheads, teachers spread misleading information and various myths about skinheads in schools.

Another problem that skinheads mention is negative attitudes of employers towards them. Employers try to make a group member abandon his/her subcultural identity or at least subcultural outfit/image.

All the above mentioned cases of discrimination are connected with mass media and its moulded opinion about the subculture. Group members claim that the mass media presents distorted, unrealistic facts about the group. The mass media also moulds a negative attitude towards the group in society or it simply tries to make entertainment without paying a lot of attention to facts and objectivity.

* The aforementioned tensions could be reduced by disseminating information about the research on the group to educational and legal (judicial) institutions and the like. There is great activity nowadays regarding the Lithuanian skinhead subculture. Various institutions show great interest in this subculture. They invite scholars to give lectures and make presentations about the skinhead subculture and identify the characteristics as well as the origins of the group. This author held lectures and presentations on the topic for schoolchildren and teachers at the Šakiai municipality and at Atžalynas High School in Kėdainiai, Lithuania (2007), lectures-discussions in Kaunas at a Santaros
Šviesa meeting and presentations for the Parliament of the Lithuanian Republic and for the Lithuanian Young Conservatives League (2008). Interviews were provided for three Lithuanian newspaper articles on the skinhead subculture during the project that dealt with racism and anti-Semitism. There was participation in a live broadcast radio talk show, *The Phenomenon of Racism*, and over other radio stations of Lithuania.

**Ethnographic examples**

**Quotations from a letter of a skinhead:**

I was on my way home from a camping trip with Kovarniai (historical-reconstructive club) at night when I was stopped by the police. They told me to take all the things out (even the tiny ones) from the car (so that they could inspect them), although my wife and children were waiting for me in the car. I really didn’t look like a dangerous person with all those fur blankets. I looked like an idiot with all my things all over the place in the street, and they weren’t even interested in what I had. They just waited until I took everything out and then they left me standing in a pile of stuff.

… Because of the situation in which I am now, I have to talk to VSD (Security Department) members no matter if I want to or not, although I haven't done anything. They just want to ‘consult’ me. … I was convicted of fighting, because I am a skinhead as well. No one was even going to check my version. No one cared that I was beaten up more than the victims and that I no longer have a mobile phone. In my previous job, I had to explain myself for my appearance and free time but, as far as I know, the laws allow me to look the way I want to.

**Quotations from the interview:**

{U~In.8~ Well, any time there’s a fight, cops come suddenly and bust mostly our guys. Then it all starts – like, ‘you’re a skinhead’, then ‘I’ll bring here a negro; he’s going to beat you up’, etc.}

{U~In.9~ Teachers…Well, teachers…For instance, my tutor told my mother that I belong to an underground organisation led by Murza and that I am continuously brainwashed. … The situation is very simple. The school headmaster read some articles about Russian skinheads and told my classmate (they are relatives) to be careful with me. Her argument was ‘do you know how they treat girls?’ But she never explained how they treat girls}.

**Quotation from a questionnaire:**

k61, please evaluate how the mass media presents your group:
{Q8 the mass media usually gives distorted facts; Q10 the mass media usually gives bullshit, tells things never happened and they never even bother to find out everything for sure; Q13 the group is usually presented on the basis of rumour and gossip}.

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1 Santara Šviesa is an intellectual movement of Lithuanians from different countries.
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Santrauka


Prieita prie išvadų, jog nacionalistų skinhedų subkultūra gali būti suprantama kaip jaunimo atsakas į globalaus pasaulio reiškinis: imigraciją ir daugiakultūrų, istorinį daugiatautės. Nacionalistinių skinhedų gyvenenos stilius susietas su jų specifiniu elgesiu, kuriam būdingas bendruomeniškumas, solidarumas ir kareiviai. Šie grupės narių bruožai jiems reikalingi globalinių pokyčių sukeltoms problemoms „spręsti“.

Autorius lygina Lietuvos skinhedų tyrimo duomenis su Vakarų tyrinėtojų duomenimis ir pažymi, kad Lietuvos ir Vakarų šalyse gyvenančios skinhedų grupės būdinga stiliaus ir maskulinizmo raške, tačiau Lietuvos skinhedai, skirtingai nei Vakarų, labiau pasižymi nacionalistine pasaulėžiūra, jie nesieja darbininkų klasės problemomis, nes atstovauja įvairiems socialiniam sluoksniams. Tyrimo akcentuojami skinhedų grupės reikšmingiai ideologijos klausimai, aptariami žiniasklaidos perteikiamai stereotipai. Taip pat atskleidžiamas skinhedų grupių bendravimas su socialine aplinka, išskiriami ryškesni atvejai.

Autorius pateikia rekomendacijas socialinėms institucijoms, ypač darbdaviams, policijos darbuotojams, žiniasklaidai, kurie, vadovaudamiesi stereotipais ir stokodami žinų apie skinhedų subkultūros narių vertybes ir jų socialinę, dažnai sukélia nereikalingą įtampą.

Raktažodžiai: skinhedai, nacionalizmas, rasizmas, subkultūra, tapatumas, gyvenimo būdas.