

# Xenophobic Youth Groups in Vorkuta Russia: Skinheads

## Abstract

Skinhead groups are not ascetic formations withdrawn from the “real”, mainstream world but groups of young people who are profoundly conscious of the world in which they live and are motivated by the need to change it. This desire to interact with and change the world leads to violent street action (in particular attacks on members of ethnic minorities and others who they feel “disgrace” Russia, e.g., homeless people). However, it also means that such groups are responsive to changes in the external environment, and this case study suggested clearly that the increased threat of arrest and imprisonment for both race-related crimes and incitement to racial and ethnic hatred has had a major impact on the performance of skinheads.

**Keywords:** xenophobia, skinhead, youth, subculture

## Introduction

Although there are an estimated 70,000 skinheads active in Russia currently and more than 70 deaths were attributed to xenophobic attacks in 2007 alone (Moscow Bureau of Human Rights), there is to date no sociological study of the skinhead subculture in Russia. Academic discussion of the issue is thus constrained by approaches that posit the movement as the “lumpen” end of the extreme nationalist ideological spectrum (Likhachev, 2002; Umland, 2005) and understand its subcultural form as “copied straight from the Western skinhead movement” (Shenfield, 2001, p. 82; see also Tarasov, 2004, p. 12). Thus this research fills a significant empirical gap by providing the first empirical study of skinheads in Russia. It is based on unique research conducted by an international collaborative team over an extended period of time.

Theoretically the research makes an important contribution to debates on the topic, what comes after “subculture”? Sociological critique on theories of youth subculture (see, for example, Bennett, 1999) has been making an important intervention in youth cultural studies at a particular moment in time. However, it is currently in danger

of slipping into a ritualistic critique of the Marxist over-determination of theories emanating from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in the 1970s and early 1980s (see contributions to this and around this debate by Bennett, Hesmondhalgh, Blackman, Shildrick & MacDonald in *Journal of Youth Studies*, 2005-2006, Vol. 8 (1, 2) and Vol. 9 (2)). Serious intervention into this debate still needs to be sustained by extensive empirical evidence; the research conducted for this project allows this since it offers unique insight into one of the classic “subcultures” upon which the CCCS theory of youth subculture was constructed and, more importantly, allows the exploration of the changing role that skinhead style and values have in young people’s lives as they navigate through the great historical processes playing out around them. On the basis of the research, an approach to the study of youth subcultures has been developed which neither imputes meaning from style practices in the absence of evidence for this (as, it is suggested, did the CCCS accounts of subculture) nor reduces youth cultural practices to expressions of consumer choice (as some post-subcultural theorising is in danger of doing). Rather it takes style practices as external markers of group solidarity and affiliation and explores, in the context of whole lives, what the substance of that affiliation is (see, for example, Pilkington, 2009).

Finally the research contributes to the growing discussion on the importance of reflexive engagement with the research process and raises a number of important questions (epistemological, ethical, emotional) about the design and conducting of research with marginal youth cultural groups (see Garifzianova, 2008; Omel’chenko, 2008; Pilkington, 2008). A book proposal based on this case study was submitted to Cambridge University Press in January 2009.

## Methods

Two periods of six-weeks of fieldwork were conducted in 2006 and 2007. Access to the groups was gained through existing contacts from earlier research conducted by the research team and snowballing. The following methods of research were employed:

- Ethnographic observation
- Interviews with respondents [recorded]
- Diary-keeping
- Photos including cameras given to respondents to photograph the group themselves
- Video recordings
- Researcher reflections on fieldwork
- Walking tours of the city with respondents

A total of 24 interviews and four fieldwork diaries were transcribed and analysed using Nvivo7 software.

## Results

- In contradistinction to many stereotypes about skinheads – associations with military and fascist organisations – skinhead groups often like the idea of “order” and “subordination” but struggle to maintain such a group structure since they are, by nature, anti-authoritarian. This is particularly true of those who come into the movement via other subcultural routes (often punk or heavy metal scenes). Moreover there is often a struggle for authority and control between those of this persuasion and those who enter the scene for more pre-conceived political reasons. These internal struggles can be key moments in the trajectories of particular skinhead groups and, in the case study developed during this project, the struggle over authority within the group finally led to its disintegration (see Omelchenko & Garifzianova, 2009).
- Skinheads are often strongly associated with a particular “style” of dress. This is certainly an attractive element of the subculture for many participants. However, as skinheads grow older, they become more aware and afraid of the sanctions meted out for the public display of skinhead affiliation thus they are increasingly likely to downplay the stylistic element of their activity. The absence of visible signs of skinheads on urban streets, therefore, does not mean that skinheads have “gone away” (Pilkington, 2009). This is illustrated by the following female skinhead during our research (2006):

Now it's not essential to dress in a way that shows clearly that you're a skinhead. Skinhead, you see again, it's what you feel here [points to heart]. If you want to dress like that – fine, it's appreciated. If you don't want to? It's no big deal. ... In any case, there are holidays and things when you just want to dress up. You dress up – and – Wow! Brilliant! But, if you don't want to, then ...

- Skinhead groups are portrayed in existing literature as exclusively male, violent subcultural formations. While these groups tend to be male dominated, it should be noted that women exist both within the core group (in the group studied here, there were at least two young women who had strong claims to be core members of the group) and certainly as part of the wider social grouping (as friends, girlfriends and wives). Indeed the gender codes governing these groupings are more complex than often portrayed, and the male solidarity central to the groups is rooted as much (if not more) in practices of homosociality as hierarchy, aggression and subordination.

### Group-society relations

- Skinhead groups are not ascetic formations withdrawn from the “real”, mainstream world but groups who are profoundly conscious of the world in

which they live and the need to change it. This desire to interact with and change the world leads to violent street actions (in particular, attacks on members of ethnic minorities and others they feel “disgrace” Russia, e.g., homeless people). At the same time, it means that their behaviour is open to manipulation by the external environment. This citation from an interview with a female skinhead (2006) from the research expresses the way in which skinheads think about tailoring their actions to what is expected by mainstream society:

... How can I put it? They are watching. The main thing is not to act like a thug. That is, they [the police] know we are here. But what’s the point, to put it crudely, if we are just hanging out. They are somehow more humane. By law you are allowed to have your point of view, your own ideology, as long as you don’t break any law. So that’s the correct position. They don’t beat you up for the sake of it. Everything’s fine in that regard. At least that’s what I think, how I see it. [But] if you get caught, then sometimes pretty bad things can happen. There was an incident when they beat evidence out of a lad. I remember that he was in hospital for some time afterwards. ...

- Another strong influence on the group is a growing awareness of negative public attitudes to skinheadism. One male respondent, for example, stated, “the generally accepted opinion is that skinheads are drunken alcoholics who beat up people”, while another summed up media representations as being, “Skinheads are drunken PTUshniki [vocational college kids]”. One male respondent acknowledged that this changed environment had impacted even on his willingness to acknowledge his affiliation verbally. Meanwhile another pointed out that it might even represent a direct threat to personal safety:

I called in on a friend and he goes, ‘So you’ve decided to become a skinhead have you?’ I said, ‘Yeah.’ And he goes, ‘Clever thinking – when the whole city here is against the skinheads. You might get away with it in the daytime but, at night, you can guarantee that you’ll get one in the head somewhere.’

- This can lead to a sense of persecution. One female respondent complained that the police would move her on or stop her and ask for her passport, then demand money for its return. Another female respondent complained that people with skinhead views were not given the same human rights as others (in particular “minorities”). As evidence of this view, she cited a case she had read about when special forces (OMON) had shot dead a skinhead:

He was just sitting there with his girlfriend in the yard. A Special Forces (OMON) unit, without explaining anything, just took him and shot him. ... That was it. Even though it is even set down in the constitution that every individual has the right to his/her opinion, own opinion as it were.... It’s your opinion. You have the right to express it.

[But] if we do, then it is understood immediately as incitement to ethnic conflict. ... But, when we are killed in Russia, it doesn't matter; that's not incitement of ethnic conflict. But when we [do/say something] that's it – it's all over.

A male respondent also complained that, while skinhead pogroms were bemoaned widely in the national press, nothing was said about what he called “the genocide against Russians” in a number of former Soviet republics and that “no Muslim has ever been prosecuted under that article [Article 282 of the Russian Criminal Code on ‘Incitement of religious or ethnic conflict’], only Russians, even though Russians are discriminated against in very many regions of Russia.”

- This strong engagement with the outside world means that legislation – and, more importantly, the implementation of legislation – does impact on behaviour. This case study suggested clearly that the increased threat of arrest and imprisonment for both race-related crimes and incitement to racial and ethnic hatred has had a major impact on the performance of skinheads. Over the period of the research with the group, the abstract possibility of imprisonment had become an increasingly tangible experience. Three male members of the group were all on record with the police; one was being actively investigated in relation to a racist attack, while another reported being regularly called in to the police and pumped for information about others. One of the member's friends had been imprisoned for two years for “incitement” (having taken the blame for a group act). In 2002 a number of friends of two other group members had been imprisoned for three years. Another core member had served 18 months of a three-year sentence and had been released just a couple of weeks prior to our visit in 2006. Although this member had been prosecuted for drug dealing rather than skinhead-related activities, nonetheless, his experiences in jail were very painful and served as a serious disincentive to maintain an open, public display of skinheadism.

### **Views, beliefs, ideology**

- Two contrasting schools of thought represent skinheads either as ideologically committed and militarily highly trained fascist forces threatening to sweep the country or, alternatively, as Tarasov puts it, “virtually uneducated. ... wretched, highly primitive and therefore dangerously brutal” (Dolgopolova, 2004). Our research suggests that – at least in small provincial cities – in fact skinhead groups are extremely diverse in terms of their political and ideological commitment. They were bound together by a core set of beliefs that shouted rather than whispered everyday xenophobias and racisms that are commonly encountered in contemporary Russia (anti-Semitism, anti-Caucasian and anti-“immigrant”

sentiments) accompanied by motifs drawn from “global” (especially UK and American) skinhead movements such as white supremacy.

- There was an almost universal dislike of formal political organisation and disinclination to get involved in party politics, even of the extreme fringe. This group of young people largely ignored party politics, although a number of the group had joined the Rodina Party – one member had become a “youth representative” for the party. This was explained by the group as being done for purely utilitarian reasons, i.e., to try to gain access to people in power so that they could extract favours in return (specifically they wanted to gain access to a gym for training).
- Interestingly, and in sharp contrast to the strong connections often made between ultra-right politics and the Orthodox Church, the group showed a strong dislike of organised religion and of Christianity in particular. This was driven largely by a strong anti-authoritarianism and is summed up well by this male respondent (2007):

**Respondent:** I hate the Orthodox Church.

**Interviewer:** Why?

**Respondent:** Because it stupefies the people. It drives it into slavery. It turns us into morons who troop off to pray.

Two respondents expressed sympathies for (neo)Paganism (one had been de-baptised at a Pagan ceremony). However, this was itself attractive, at least partially, because of the lack of organisation and ritual commitment required of followers and it was not a driving force in their lives (see Pilkington & Popov, 2009).

- Deciphering a coherent ideological line even within one person’s discourse, let alone across the whole group, is difficult. The Russian government, for example, is dubbed “Zionist occupied”, yet it was, at that time, led by Vladimir Putin whom the rest of the world considered a strong Russian authoritarian out to reassert Russia’s power. Another deep ambiguity lies in the respondents’ attitudes to Nazi Germany; Adolf Hitler – who was responsible for the death of over 20 million Soviet citizens – is idolised, for example, yet Iosif Stalin is vilified for “killing his own people”. If an overarching ideological strand in the very diverse levels of commitment and articulation of views about society and politics was to be delineated among informants, it is probably the classic palingenetic fascist myth that sees current society as being “degraded” or in fatal decline and the desire to pursue revolutionary change that will overthrow this regime and allow the rebirth of a purer nation. However, in contrast to many iterations of fascist ideology, there is a strong sense of the new, revived Russia as being part of the “modern” world as opposed to retreating to a conservative, pre-modern era.

## Conclusions

Ethnographic research with xenophobic youth groups turn existing academic literature “inside out”. It allows the surface manifestation of skinhead style and racist narratives – upon which research focuses to date – to be displaced temporarily by deeper questions about why skinheads remain an attractive cultural strategy for young people. Such research is vital to understanding the motives for joining and for leaving such groups. It reveals that young Russians adopt skinheads today as a means of generating meaningful solidarities which help them navigate their lives on the margins of Russian society – literally in the case of Vorkuta. The research also revealed that skinhead cultural strategies are not inward looking. Skinhead respondents were, on the contrary, profoundly conscious of the world around them and motivated by a desire to change the world which they articulate verbally through ideological statements and physically through street violence. This engagement with the environment also means, however, that they are responsive to changes in it; in particular the increased threat of arrest and imprisonment (due to legislative changes) and growing hostility to their actions on the part of the public were shown to have had a major impact on the performance of skinheads.

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## **Ksenofobinės jaunimo grupės Vorkutoje (Rusijoje): skinhedai**

### **Santrauka**

Straipsnis grindžiamas Vorkutoje (Rusijoje) atlikto tyrimo duomenų analize. Lauko tyrimas buvo atliktas 2006 ir 2007 m., dalyvaujant SAL projekte. Naudoti 24 interviu ir 4 lauko tyrimų dienoraščių duomenys.

Autorės pažymi, kad skinhedų (angl. *skinheads*) grupės nėra izoliuotos grupuotės, atskilusios nuo „tikro“ dominuojančio pasaulio, o atvirkesčiai – šios jaunų žmonių grupės nepaprastai gerai suvokia pasaulį, kuriame gyvena, ir yra motyvuojamos poreikio jį pakeisti. Šis troškimas paveikti ir pakeisti pasaulį sąlygoja smurtinius gatvės veiksmus (ypač etninių mažumų atstovų bei tų, kurie, jų manymu, yra Rusijos „gėda“, pvz., benamiai, užpuolimus). Tokios grupės reaguoja į išorinės aplinkos pokyčius, ir šio atvejo tyrimas įrodė, kad padidėjusi arešto ir įkalinimo grėsmė tiek už rasistinius nusikaltimus, tiek už rasistinės ir etninės neapykantos kurstymą turėjo didelį poveikį skinhedų veiklai.

Analizėje akcentuoti SAL projekto probleminiai klausimai (žr. priedą, p. 276), tokie kaip grupės ir visuomenės sąveika, grupės narių poveikio visuomenei poreikis, narių prisijungimo prie grupės motyvai ir kt.

**Raktažodžiai:** ksenofobija, skinhedai, jaunimas, subkultūra.