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The Social and Political Role of War Veterans

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Anton Oleynik

**Валерий Михайлович Анисимков,  
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mirror of prison criminal traditions, Sankt-  
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2003, 204 pages*].**

- 1 The title of the book, *Russia in the mirror of prison criminal traditions*, is somewhat misleading. It suggests an emphasis on eventual links between, on the one hand, prison and the prison community and, on the other hand, Russian society at large. Rather, the book is an insightful and detailed look inside the prison community taken separately as it existed during Soviet times and the early years of post-Soviet transformations. It represents a revisited and significantly enlarged version of a previous title by the same author, *Prison community: milestones in its history*<sup>1</sup>. This adaptation contains a careful description of the multilayered structure of Russia's prison community (criminals vested in informal authority, or *avtoritety*, real men – an analogue of the middle class in prison, and various groups of marginalized individuals considered as “pariahs”), norms structuring interactions within and between these layers and their historical evolution since the tsarist era. This depiction is based on the premise that prison subculture has unique features related to particularities of criminal activities which can hardly be found outside prison walls. “Criminal subculture refers to a particular web of interpersonal connections between *repeated delinquents* in a relatively *closed milieu*, based on a system of distorted values, a slang and signs with a symbolic value. These elements structure norms, perceptions and external attributes associated with *common delinquent activities* and an *anti-social lifestyle*” (p. 25, emphasis added).
- 2 The endorsement of the activity approach (*деятельностный подход*), one of the cornerstones of the Soviet school of social psychology, helps highlight the *differentia specifica* of prison subculture (p. 15). Yet it overshadows eventual connections between prison and the society as a whole. It is not by coincidence that the first mention of the spread of criminal traditions outside prison fences (in the case of Russian detention camps the image of fences as a presumed watershed between what is “normal” and what is not, seems more appropriate than that of stone walls) can be found only in the last part of the concluding chapter. References to criminal subculture in the organization of everyday life of ordinary Russians are attributed to a punitive bias of the Soviet and post-Soviet system of justice. “The more people receive prison sentences, the more there are converts into prison subculture” (p. 176). The quantitative data taken from other sources confirm the existence of the punitive bias. Russia's Prison Population Ratio in 2006 is one of the highest in the world (607.8 prisoners per 100,000 of total population)<sup>2</sup>. A significant number of individuals, even those convicted for minor offences, receive custodial sentences (Table 1), which expose them to the influence of prison subculture. It is worth noticing that the latter ratio recently started again to increase, after reaching its lowest value in twenty-five years in 2000.

**Table 1 “The ratio of those who received custodial sentences in the total number of convicted individuals, the Russian Federation, 1980-2006, %”**

Source: the official data of the Federal Prison Service of the Russian Federation (FSIN) compiled and processed by Dr. Todd Foglesong (the Vera Institute of Justice, New York), October 2006.

- 3 This manner of seeing Russian society through the lens (or, in the author’s words, in **the mirror**) of criminal traditions does not contradict assumptions of the activity approach. Yet the book fails to compare it with alternative explanations for the spread of criminal subculture and to persuade the reader of the relative merits of the former. For instance, R. Merton’s analysis of social structures generating delinquency seems relevant to the analysis of links between criminal behavior and what is considered “normal” in the society at large. Focusing on American society at the early stages of capitalist development, he attributes the spread of deviant behavior to “the individual [who] has assimilated the cultural emphasis on success without equally internalizing the morally prescribed norms governing means for its attainment”<sup>3</sup>. In other words, elements of criminal subculture spread in the broader society not because a significant part of the population had a prison experience, but because of the non-restricted desire for wealth maximization. Russia went through a very similar period of “wild capitalism” in the 1990s. However, the likelihood that the dramatic increase in the ratio of acquisitive crimes in the total number of registered crimes in the early 1990s (75.8% in 1995 compared with 51% in 1986)<sup>4</sup> was **a reflection** of the officially endorsed motto “enrich yourself” – a reference to legally and morally improved means – was completely omitted. In this perspective profit maximization was restricted only by a particular set of values and norms embedded in prison subculture (one of them is “don’t ransack your own people”, see p. 74).
- 4 Oddly enough, the imperative of wealth maximization had a very destructive impact on the traditional prison community with its disregard for pecuniary wealth and its agents, i.e. it excludes any embeddedness but considerations of technical expediency. The word “businessman” – *кооператор, спекулянт, барыга* – had a pejorative meaning (see p. 123); members of none of these informal categories could aspire to a respectable status within the prison community. Unfortunately the author only tangentially touches the issues of changes induced in the prison community by market reforms. He just mentions the practice of “buying” high positions in the informal criminal hierarchy by some representatives of the new market-oriented generation in the 1990s (pp. 156-157). Such an omission would not have raised any questions in a book published in the early 1990s, but it catches the eye of today’s reader. According to my own account, market reforms proved more efficient in destroying the traditional norms of prison subculture than endless efforts by the penitentiary administration to fight its manifestations<sup>5</sup>.
- 5 Still the other reason for the spread of prison subculture outside prison fences consists in the “elective affinity”, to use M. Weber’s terms, between the social organization in prison and the society at large. For instance, prison as a total institution involves power relationships in a particular form. Power of prison guards over inmates does not always have a legitimate or rational nature, especially in the eyes of the latter group. It has an extremely asymmetrical character, excludes efficient feedback mechanisms (i.e., inmates have little say) and relies on violent techniques for imposing will. If these elements can be found in everyday experience outside prison, e.g., the state and its representatives are perceived by ordinary men and women in a similar manner, this might lead people without any prison background to adopt and endorse values and behavioral patterns generated by prisoners subject to imposed power in a pure form<sup>6</sup>. If one pays attention only to former convicts and their close relatives as vehicles for the transmission of prison subculture, then the size of the audience of the *Radio Chanson* specializing in broadcasting songs that derive from prison subculture remains a puzzle. Indeed, this radio station has the fifth largest audience in Russia (it reaches daily 3.91 million listeners, or 2.7% of total population) and the third largest audience in Moscow (where it reaches daily 1

million listeners, or 9.6% of total population)<sup>7</sup>. These figures significantly exceed the number of former convicts in the society (as of November 2006, 871,174 individuals were held in jails and prisons). Similarly, prison slang, *mat* and *fenya*, is spoken not only in prison but also on the street or even in corporate headquarters.

6 The author's neglect in probing links between prison and the wider society in more depth does not reduce the value of his key finding. Prison as a home for criminal traditions contributes less to the re-education of offenders than to their re-socialization according to prison subculture. Most attempts to fight criminal traditions by administrative and disciplinary means have demonstrated their inefficiency. "The compulsory isolation of representatives of a particular informal category [informal leaders, *avtoritety*, who are responsible for the development and enforcement of criminal traditions, – A.O.] does not touch roots of the phenomenon and the informal categorization re-emerges anyway" (p. 137). So, he further concludes, there is an urgent need for reducing the punitive bias of the system of justice and sending less people to prison, namely by substituting non-custodial sentences for custodial ones in the case of minor offences and first-time offenders (p. 177).

7 The principal value of the book exists in the author's claim for less punitive justice which is derived from his "insider" knowledge and practical experience. Before starting an academic career, Vladimir Anisimkov worked in a remote, high security detention camp for thirteen years (1976-1989); his last position was head of this penitentiary. Not many books on prison subculture are written by previous, long-time penitentiary employees or officials, especially books that are critical about prison<sup>8</sup>. This 'hands on' experience has its advantages and disadvantages. As for the latter, it might create a bias in the perception of prison subculture, when the analysis tends to highlight only negative and destructive sides. As for the advantages, the call for reducing the reliance on prison as a disciplinary institution made by a researcher with inside information appears especially credible. Flaws in the reasoning and demonstrations (e.g., most tables in the book are difficult to decipher: neither the size of the sample nor how it was constructed is specified) then count less. In the social sciences, "personification" of analytical criteria is not uncommon. C. Geertz, discussing anthropological accounts of life in distant and not easily accessible societies, indicates that "the validity of arguments is closely connected to the personality" of the researcher<sup>9</sup>. Unfortunately the author's personality openly emerges in the text only on one occasion: when he discusses his astonishment, then a freshman in the system, of hearing *fenya* from a senior colleague, head of the operative department (p. 126). Despite its brevity, the account is rich in potential revelations: first, the adaptation of elements of prison subculture by prison staff; second, the role of operative departments in prison (they can be called secret services in miniature because they use various techniques from the toolbox of the latter). The book would have gained had the author's personal experience entered into the analysis in more manifest forms as a source for both credibility and self-reflection.

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### Endnotes

1 Анисимков В. М., *Тюремная община: «вехи» истории*, [Москва]: 1993, 72 с.

2 Source: *World Prison Population Lists* published by the British Home Office since 1999. The US has the highest PPR since 1999 (727.4 in 2004), which relegated Russia to the second rank.

3 Merton Robert, 'Social Structure and Anomie', *American Sociological Review*, October 1938, 3 (5): 672.

4 *Криминальная ситуация в России и ее изменения*, Москва: Криминологическая ассоциация, 1996, с. 26.

5 Oleinik Anton, *Organized Crime, Prison and Post-Soviet Societies*, with preface by A. Touraine, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003, pp. 244-249.

6 See a special issue of the review *Неприкосновенный запас*, №4 (36), 2004 (namely these two contributions: <http://www.nz-online.ru/index.phtml?aid=25011102> and <http://www.nz-online.ru/index.phtml?aid=25011101> retrieved on Nov. 26, 2006) for the development of this thesis and its comparison with arguments similar to those developed in V. Anisimkov's book.

7 Source: *TNS Radio Index*, February – July 2006 for Russia (<http://www.tns-global.ru/rus/data/ratings/radio/russia/>

[\\_survey\\_radio\\_index\\_rossiya\\_fevral\\_\\_\\_iyul\\_2006\\_osnovnie\\_pokazateli\\_/rossiya.wbp](http://www.tns-global.ru/rus/data/ratings/radio/russia/_survey_radio_index_rossiya_fevral___iyul_2006_osnovnie_pokazateli_/rossiya.wbp)), August – October 2006 for Moscow ([http://www.tns-global.ru/rus/data/ratings/radio/moscow/\\_avgust\\_\\_\\_oktyabr\\_2006/moskva.wbp](http://www.tns-global.ru/rus/data/ratings/radio/moscow/_avgust___oktyabr_2006/moskva.wbp) retrieved on Nov. 26, 2006).

8 Another example of a critical insider's analysis is Александров Юрий К., *Очерки криминальной субкультуры*, Москва: Права человека, 2002, 148 с.

9 Geertz Clifford, *Ici et Là-bas : L'anthropologue comme acteur*, Paris : Editions Métailié, 1996, p. 14.

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