

CHAPTER 1

MAFIA

If you wish to understand the Soviet Union, you can make an excellent beginning by going to the movies and seeing ‘The Godfather’... because the Soviet system since Stalin may be usefully regarded as a regime of mafioso types who, incredibly, have become the political establishment.

—Irving Kristol¹

As a well-defined phenomenon, which can be clearly described, measured, compared to other phenomena, the mafia does not exist. But I have met its members. Or some close to them. They look dangerous. *And so they wish.*

—Nils Christie²

About a mile from the Kremlin across the Moscow River, Bolshaya Yaki-manka Street rose to meet October Square and splintered in various directions. More than just the focal point in a tangled crisscross of roads, October Square offered an analogy of Russia itself where past and present collided in a constant reminder of unrealized potential and stifled ambition.

The Square took its name from the month the Bolsheviks stumbled headlong to power in 1917, leaving them as surprised as anyone at their success. An enormous iron statue of Lenin surrounded by children of the revolution towered in the center of the Square, an unseen wind furling back his coat, his chest pushing confidently into the radiant future that his leadership promised.

Despite whatever promises the diminutive Siberian fashioned in order to manipulate the country he was creating, reality had an uncanny way of interfering. Civil war and Lenin’s own backward economic plans set the country on a path of almost unceasing privation and hardship. Rather than glorifying the achievements of a hero, the monument was now a daily reminder of the

1. Quoted in Charles Krauthammer, “Communist Mafia on Trial,” *The Washington Post*, August 7, 1992, p. A2.

2. Nils Christie, *A Suitable Amount of Crime*, Oxford, Routledge, 2004, p. 43.

person responsible for unleashing a steady rain of social dislocation and political terror, more than seven decades worth. To add insult to injury, this imposing likeness of Lenin was too large to remove, unlike most of the other monuments to the players of the great and tragic Soviet experiment.

The Warsaw Hotel and the Moscow Institute of Metals and Alloys stood in Lenin's line of sight, the former previously a den of shady deals and prostitution, the latter having birthed some of the wealthiest 'oligarchs' in the country. A Lenin frozen for all time unable to shield his eyes from the two ends of the criminal spectrum he spawned seemed worthy of Greek mythology.

Across Leninsky Prospekt from the hotel stood the Children's Library—innocence and wisdom, two things that seemed to be sorely lacking in modern Russia. One building farther was prime office space that had been commandeered by the KGB during the breakup of the USSR. Foreign business partners of the Russian spy agency set up offices here, helping to move millions of dollars to overseas bank accounts, safe from the sticky fingers of Russian tax collectors, the unpredictable economy, and a disintegrating Communist Party.³

At the corner of Zhitnaya Street and Bolshaya Yakimanka on the north side of October Square was a great slab of white concrete that took up half a block and stood ten stories tall. The building was originally planned to be twenty floors but, as was often the case, materials ran out in mid-construction and the state decided to cap it at the halfway point. A steady flow of people streamed in and out, while crowds bustled along the sidewalk hurrying to and from the neighboring Oktyabrskaya metro station.

This was the national headquarters of the Ministry of Internal Affairs—MVD by its Russian initials. In its many manifestations it had been one of the most feared government agencies in the history of the Soviet Union, second only to the KGB. Indeed, at times over the past seventy years the two had merged to become a single all-powerful super ministry of oppression.

The MVD was a sprawling mass of bureaucracy, nearly 800,000 strong. It was the administrative equivalent of the FBI, DEA, and all state and local police departments rolled into one. Its primary function was to conduct regular law enforcement work—set policy, conduct investigations, and make arrests. But the Soviets also crammed the administration of the country's prison system, state automobile inspectorate, and fire departments under this same bureaucratic roof. More importantly, it served as one of the buffers between the regime and the populace.

3. According to the Deputy Chief of the Organized Crime Control Department, Genady Chebotaryov, his department uncovered nearly 100 bank accounts in the West that the KGB had set up.

Not simply a paramilitary organization like every other police department in the world, the MVD boasted war-making capability in its Internal Troops branch (*Vnutrennaya Voiska*). Equipped with armored personnel vehicles, tanks, helicopters, and divisions of troops, the VV had been fighting small wars and border skirmishes long before Chechnya entered the world's consciousness.

This was how the MVD looked in the 1990s. Things have changed a bit since then; for example, the prison service has been moved to the Ministry of Justice and new departments have been formed as Russia tries to steady herself under the weight of innumerable and seemingly insurmountable challenges.

I had an office in this building—16 Zhitnaya Street—on the ninth floor in the Organized Crime Control Department in 1990–91. I sat across the hall from the head of the department, the legendary Alexander Gurov, and wandered the corridors much as anyone else in the building, with few restrictions. After weeks of my coming and going, the guards at the main entrance substituted their scrutiny of my identification card and formal salutes with handshakes and laughs. I was the token American—‘a real live American’ in their words—and they seemed fascinated, puzzled, and, for the most part, glad to have me. I befriended quite a few of the officers, met their families, saw how they lived, and understood their daily challenges. It was here that I first began to see what the Russian ‘mafia’ was all about.

In early March 1991, while I was sitting in the office of then-Colonel Gennady Chebotaryov, there was a quick knock on the door. Without waiting for permission to enter, one of Chebotaryov's agents rushed in and, on seeing me, stopped suddenly in the middle of the room.

“Gennady Fyodorovich, may I speak freely?” the agent inquired, shooting a glance in my direction.

“What is it?” Chebotaryov asked.

“It's just come to our attention that Ivan Petrovich is connected to the ‘mafia.’ He's supposed to attend the strategy meeting you're having in fifteen minutes with the deputy minister.”

It was a dramatic moment for me. I sat perfectly still, barely breathing, awaiting Chebotaryov's response. He pinched the bridge of his nose as if steeling himself for another frustrating day, and simply muttered an expletive under his breath.

As second in command of the Organized Crime Control Department, Chebotaryov was to devise a plan for getting the thugs off the streets not only in Moscow but also throughout the USSR, across eleven time zones and in 15 distinct republics. Now he was faced with news that the bad guys were apparently coming in the Ministry's front door.

That brief exchange that sent my head reeling would quickly lose its drama and recede in my memory as just another day in Moscow. Only later did it dawn on me that Chebotaryov was relatively unmoved by what I thought was ‘shocking’ news. The bad guys on the outside weren’t invading like an enemy force as I had thought and as had frequently been portrayed by both officialdom and the media; the bad guys on the inside were inviting them in. And it had been going on for some time. Indeed, the very deputy minister Chebotaryov was supposed to meet with the son-in-law of a former Moscow Party boss and thoroughly corrupted himself.

What was it about the word ‘mafia’ that stirred up such emotion, however brief, in me? Images of *The Godfather*, gangsters, thugs, crime bosses, underworld, machine guns, and shootouts came to mind. Al Capone. The Five Families of New York. Made-men and wise guys. Lifeless bodies slumped over steering wheels or sprawled in pools of blood in back rooms of Italian restaurants in Brooklyn or Queens. Prostitutes, drugs, gambling. Paying off politicians, threatening businessmen. This was a world I knew in the United States only through newspapers and movies where it was larger than life, romanticized, and demonized. For me, it was somewhat removed from reality. The human element had seemingly disappeared. The repetition of the lore turned criminals into both heroes and monsters, something otherworldly. Oddly, they were also regarded as highly organized and disciplined with oaths and codes for their own brand of right living. Civilized monsters, I supposed.

In Moscow, though, it was in my face. It was all over the media, screaming headlines, raw news footage, gangsters roaming freely about town. And ‘mafia’ became the scapegoat for pretty much everything. But what was it?