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### Reorganizing crime: mafia and anti-mafia in post-Soviet Georgia

Perry Sherouse<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Michigan

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Reorganizing crime: mafia and anti-mafia in post-Soviet Georgia**, by Gavin Slade, Oxford/New York, Oxford University Press, 2013, xiii + 217 pp., £65.00, ISBN 978-0-19-967464-0

Thieves-in-law (Russian, *vory-v-zakone*; Georgian, *k'anonieri kurdebi*) are professional criminal leaders invested in practising and perpetuating mafia activities according to a code known as 'the understandings'. This criminal fraternity originated in the Soviet Union in the early twentieth century. Of all the Soviet republics, the small country of Georgia was the 'biggest producer of thieves-in-law' (5), a reputation that grew more acute during the tumultuous 1990s. In 2005, however, a major anti-organized crime campaign was initiated in Georgia with legislation patterned on measures taken in Italy. Gavin Slade investigates the successful reduction of organized criminal activity and influence by considering why thieves-in-law in Georgia had 'low levels of resilience to state attack once it came in 2005' (173). Slade accounts for the structural components of the organized-crime world in Georgia that made a once-robust criminal organization unable to withstand state pressure. In addition to puzzling through the interlock between criminal organization and changes in economy and society, Slade invites us to consider the symbolic and organizational realm of the thieves-in-law.

This highly readable monograph is based on in-depth research in Georgia between 2008 and 2012, during which time Slade conducted 51 expert interviews, including four prison visits. Slade includes archival materials from the Central Committee of the Communist Party, court cases from the general prosecutor's office, and hundreds of police files on individual thieves-in-law from the Special Operations Department, Anti-Organized Crime units in Tbilisi and Kutaisi (29). In describing thieves-in-law, Slade works from Charles Tilly's concept of 'trust networks'. Slade's discussion of thieves-in-law articulates with scholarly treatments of organized crime from other geographic and social contexts, inviting consideration of how the specificities of the post-socialist case of Georgia more broadly inform the ways that we understand the state-mafia nexus in terms of organizational resilience.

Thieves-in-law represent an alternative moral and economic order, fully intertwined with formal and official structures. At times, Slade refers to 'thieves-in-law' as a 'brand name' (41, 160) with respect to how it promotes and verifies one's reputation. In Chapter 3 (Thieves-in-Law as a Soviet and Post-Soviet Mafia in Georgia), Slade describes how mafia services such as *krysha* (protection) and *garcheva* (arbitration) function with respect to legal and illegal economic realms. In Chapter 4 (Predator vs. Predator: The State and Mafia before and after the Rose Revolution), he provides a historical account of the shifting relationship between the mafia and the state, emphasizing how strategies on both sides changed over time. Slade divides his treatment of the state-mafia relationship into three periods, 1980–1991, 1992–2003 and 2003–2012, discussing the dominant trends in each. Slade's discussion of several axes of reform that reshaped mafia-state relations (including legislative, police and prison reform, and educational reform) is excellent.

In a slight departure from the focus on Georgian criminality, Chapter 5 (Organizing and Re-organizing Crime in Georgia) begins with a discussion of Georgian thieves-in-law in Russia. Utilizing a quantitative method called social network analysis, Slade argues that locality and factionalism are significant factors in understanding the organization of thieves-in-law, both in Georgia and in Russia. Slade indicates that during the 1990s, many authoritative Georgian

thieves-in-law relocated to Russia to capitalize on new markets. The quantitative approach that dominates this chapter, however, affords only a limited view of the networks, alliances and allegiances that have mattered for thieves-in-law. How has factionalism cleaved along age, ethnic, geographic and other social boundaries over time?

One is appreciative of the limitations and risks present to Slade in sketching out the details of criminal factions and social alignments. Research in the domain of organized crime is sensitive, requiring caution with sources and anonymity for respondents. Anecdotes about particular incidents associated with thieves-in-law, such as Terjola's fake fruit juice protection racket in the 1970s, give Slade's monograph a richness that complements his rigor as a descriptive criminologist. Slade's account could be made more vivid by drawing out the social settings and networks in which he encountered his expert informants. We rarely see the contradictions, discontinuities, or complexities inherent in his primary materials or ethnographic encounters. What forms of expertise do Slade's informants represent, and how are those multiple perspectives grounded in contemporary geographic and social space?

Chapter 6 (Fitting the Frame: Prison and Recruitment) deals with the role of prison in the referral, recommendation, recruitment and reputation of thieves, including the entry process (with a 'baptism' ritual) which occurs at the thieves' meeting (*skhodka*). In doing so, Slade addresses trends in age of commitment, noting that the average age of baptism for thieves is 24, while average age of first conviction is 20. Prison is understood as a necessity for forging thieves-in-law. Chapter 7 ('With My Body and Soul': Commitment and Exit Costs) argues that commitment to the thieves' law as the primary incentive to join and remain in the organization has declined. Slade discusses commitment and binding mechanisms, including payment into the criminal common fund (*obshchak*), rejection of social ties, and changes in social identity.

In Chapter 8 (Social Attitudes to the Criminal Nobility), Slade discusses the symbolic elements of distinction through which status is negotiated, including tattoos and language. There is a tantalizingly brief section at the end of this chapter about thieves-in-law and the Orthodox Church (166–167). Slade describes how overt involvement with the church has been a way that thieves-in-law have bolstered their status. Additionally, there is a large overlap in the semiotic repertoire between the church and the thieves-in-law, expressed in language practices, status markings (such as tattoos) and even architectural forms, along with strikingly similar engagements with concepts of devotion and piety. Expanding the discussion on the relationship between the church and the thieves-in-law would greatly contribute to an understanding of the specificity of the cultural surround in the Georgian case. Describing a proliferation of media artefacts contributing to the mythic status of the mafia in Georgia, Slade comments that 'this subculture still has [a hold] over popular consciousness' which is linked 'to cultural expressions of manliness and honor that go back centuries' (172). There is much more to say about the configuration of masculinity with respect to thieves-in-law (an all-male organization) and the interface with other social institutions, such as the Orthodox Church.

Gavin Slade has produced a fascinating overview of organized crime in Georgia that will be of interest to criminologists, social scientists, and scholars of post-socialism in the Caucasus. Slade stitches together a compelling narrative of the internal and external aspects of organized criminal life. This monograph is essential reading for making sense of institutional and cultural trends within Georgia.

Perry Sherouse  
University of Michigan  
Email: [perrymws@umich.edu](mailto:perrymws@umich.edu)

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