

# **Red Mafia: How the Russian Mob Has Invaded America (Review)**

by Johanna Granville

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In *Red Mafia*, investigative reporter Robert Friedman delves into the world of Russian organized crime, which he claims differs from the Italian La Cosa Nostra. Whereas the Italians usually refrain from harming journalists, prosecutors, judges, and innocent family members, the Russians will—in the words of a retired New York City policeman-- shoot anyone “just to see if their gun works” (xvii). Friedman impresses upon the reader the degree to which the Russian mafia is already deeply entrenched in the United States (especially Brighton Beach, Miami, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Las Vegas, and Denver) and overseas (in far-flung cities like Moscow, Hong Kong, Bangkok, Bogotá, and Toronto). It is involved in a wide variety of activities such as car theft, prostitution, gasoline bootlegging, arms smuggling, cocaine and heroin trafficking, extortion (even of players in the National Hockey League), and an array of sophisticated white-collar computer crimes such as counterfeiting, credit card schemes, and insurance frauds. As Friedman points out, a large percentage of the Russian mobsters were Soviet Jews who immigrated to the United States, chiefly to the Brighton Beach area, in the 1970s. Ironically, whereas President Jimmy Carter thought he was championing human rights by supporting the Jackson-Vanik Amendment, which withheld most-favoured-nation status from socialist countries that restricted Jewish emigration, he was actually welcoming in hardened criminals the Kremlin was only too happy to purge from the USSR. Lacking access to immigrants’ criminal records, United States immigration officials even now continue to allow citizens from Eastern Europe and Eurasia with shady backgrounds to settle in the United States.

Friedman provides colourful portraits of key Russian mafia leaders, such as Marat Balagula, Vyacheslav Ivankov, Monya Elson, and Semion Mogilevich, many whom he interviewed in prisons and gaudy strip bars in Brighton Beach and Miami. Marat Balagula, originally from Odessa, inter alia expanded a gasoline bootlegging scam into the largest tax heist in American history. He set up an intricate “daisy chain” of phoney gasoline distributorships, moving large shipments of gasoline—on paper only—from one distributor to another, creating a blizzard of paper. The “burn company” designated to pay taxes to the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) would turn out to be only a post office box under a phoney name. By the time the IRS went to collect the overdue taxes, the revenue agents would find themselves buried in a complex paper trail leading nowhere (47). Balagula was finally convicted for a credit card scam and incarcerated at Lewisburg federal penitentiary in Pennsylvania. Vyacheslav Ivankov, one of the most powerful of the vory v zakone (“thieves-in-law”), ordered so many car bombings and murders that they scared off many Western corporations from investing in Russia and embarrassed Russian government leaders. Russian mafia leaders (the Bratskii Krug) finally arranged to “export” him to the United States in 1992. Over the next three years, Ivankov recruited “combat brigades” led by an ex-KGB officer and composed of former athletes and veterans of the Afghanistan war. His group got involved in gambling, prostitution, and arms sales. Finally arrested in 1995 for extortion, Ivankov continued to issue orders from his prison cell to his henchmen and even sent a death threat to Friedman in 1998.

A death threat is bad enough, but another mafia boss, the Budapest-based Semion Mogilevich (known as “the Brainy Don”), actually put out a contract on Friedman’s life (xiii). Friedman also provides an enthralling vignette about Monya Elson, native of the Jewish ghetto in Kishinev, Moldova, who began his criminal career as an expert pickpocket, graduated to extortion, and then—after emigrating to New York in 1978—expanded into credit card scams because “these Americans don’t carry cash” (18). In another line of work, together with dissident writer Yuri Brokhin, Elson would rob honest jewellers. Dressing up as Orthodox Jews, replete with paste-on beards, side curls, long black coats, and black hats, they would ask to see a variety of expensive diamond stones.

**While Brokhin babbled in Yiddish, distracting the shop owner, Elson switched the diamonds with zirconium.**

**Friedman writes with colour and wit; the book is full of rich anecdotal information. However, like many books by journalists, Red Mafia lacks an overall conceptual framework and borders on sensationalism. Sweeping generalizations irritate the reader, especially given the lack of citations of sources. Friedman bases his observations on personal interviews with mafia members and law enforcement officers, but his book will not allow the careful scholar of organized crime to replicate his research.**

**Furthermore, Friedman's writing reflects a certain bias against the FBI—understandable, given the threats upon his life and the FBI's inability to protect him or even provide advice. Friedman claims that the FBI waited too long—until 1994—to organize its Anti-Russian Crime Unit after the “cancer has spread beyond the lymph nodes.” He compares this delay to the FBI's belated campaign against La Cosa Nostra in 1972, after the latter had metamorphosed into a “criminal colossus.” In truth, the FBI faces real obstacles but has also scored successes. Had it not arrested the mobsters named above, Friedman would not have had the material to write his book. Given the global scale of Russian organized crime, the FBI simply cannot combat it effectively without international cooperation. Nearly all Russian mafia bosses hold Israeli citizenship. Since Israel will not extradite citizens, American law enforcement authorities cannot prosecute them, thereby weakening their ability to deter mafia members from committing future crimes. The influence of the American Jewish community and fear of perceived anti-Semitism also hamper efforts to clamp down on the Russian Jewish mobsters. The special American relationship with Israel also reinforces the mafia's power, given its entrenchment in that country. Israeli government leaders (including “Bibi” Netanyahu) have been known to accept huge sums of campaign money from the Russian mafia, even after having been warned by the FBI and others. To his credit, Friedman informs the reader of these difficulties.**

**In short, Red Mafia is informative and well written. Serious scholars of Russian organized crime will want to read James Finckenauer's Russian Mafia in America for a more**

balanced and objective analysis. Also worth reading is Paul Klebnikov's *Godfather of the Kremlin: Boris Berezovsky and the Looting of Russia*, which presents the problem of Russian organized crime in a biographical context. Another worthy supplement to Friedman's book is Chrystia Freeland's *Sale of the Century: Russia's Wild Ride from Communism to Capitalism*, which analyzes the growth of organized crime as part of the larger history of post-Soviet Russia since 1990.

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