

CRIME IN COMMUNIST AND POST-COMMUNIST EASTERN EUROPE

*Kelly Hignett*¹

In some respects my research into crime and deviance spans a relatively broad spectrum, in terms of both chronology and subject matter. This diversity is reflected in my research profile: in recent years I have published on topics ranging from a study of criminal activities amongst border peoples in pre-modern Eastern Europe to more contemporary studies focused on exposing the dark underbelly of crime and corruption that proliferated in communist-era Eastern Europe; exploring the post-Cold War internationalisation of the Russian *Mafiya* and analysing the evolution of transnational organized crime in today's 'global village'. However the various strands of my research all relate to the overarching theme of crime and deviance in the East European region (broadly defined), often through taking a wider comparative or international approach. This is a strength that frequently enables me to combine my historical research with analysis of more contemporary developments.

My current research primarily focuses on further developing and sometimes challenging popular assumptions about crime under communism and the evolution of modern organised crime in the former communist block. In particular, I have argued that in order to fully understand the development of crime and organised crime in the post-socialist period, we need to take the experiences and legacies of socialist rule into account.

The communist regimes in both the USSR and across Eastern Europe consistently claimed that levels of crime under socialism were negligible, particularly in comparison with the West. Professional and organised crime in particular was dismissed as a 'western problem', a capitalist phenomenon that was not officially recognised under socialism. In many respects however, the East European regimes masked rather than solved their

¹ Dr Kelly Hignett, Lecturer in History, Swansea University, Wales, UK kelly.hignett@gmail.com
Recent publications include 'Transnational Organized Crime and the Global Village', in F. Allum and S. Gilmore (eds.) *The Routledge Handbook of Transnational Organized Crime* (Forthcoming, September 2011); 'The Changing Face of Organized Crime in Post-Communist Central and Eastern Europe', (2010) 18/1 *Debate: Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*; 'Co-option or Criminalisation? The State, Border Communities and Crime in Early Modern Europe' In M. Galeotti (ed.), *Organised Crime in History* (Routledge, 2009)

crime problems and a high level of hidden crime was concealed within and facilitated by the socialist system. In fact, by the final decades of the communist era, a majority of East European citizens regularly engaged in various 'petty illegalities' and informal economic exchanges, something which came to be considered as normal and morally acceptable everyday behaviour, despite being against state law. Popular participation in certain kinds of criminal activity was not only accepted by a majority within society but was also increasingly condoned and even actively encouraged by state authorities. As a result, powerful criminal networks existed and evolved within the socialist system, spawning a criminal underworld with its own culture, language and moral code. Closer inspection of the murky pasts of many of the key figures to have risen to prominence in the contemporary underworld, highlights the fact that these 'godfathers' first established their criminal credentials in the underground economy that proliferated during the latter decades of communist rule.

There are many reasons why the study of crime and deviance in Eastern Europe is a topic that merits further research and analysis, even beyond the fact that it constitutes a fascinating study in its own right. Previous restrictions on the availability of relevant data due to high levels of censorship and the rigid ideological interpretation of crime placed considerable constraints on researchers working in this area. The collapse of communism has thus created opportunities for a fuller and franker assessment of crime and deviance during the communist period, due to the opening of state archives and the ability to utilise written and oral accounts of people's attitudes towards and experiences of crime under communism, something which has formed an integral part of my own research into this area. These developments also correlate with a number of more general historiographical trends in recent decades: the growth of interest in crime and deviance as a valuable aspect of social history; the increasing emphasis upon oral history as a viable historical resource and a shift away from the previous predominance on studying the 'high politics' of the Cold War and towards the study of 'the everyday' in communist Eastern Europe.

The study of crime and deviance can also provide us with some fascinating insights into the relationship that evolved between state and society under communism. Studying popular attitudes towards law and crime allows for the exploration of the widening gulf that developed between the 'official line' – the ideologically driven beliefs, values and behaviour promoted by these regimes - and the realities of life under communism in Eastern Europe. Studying crime and deviance allows us to explore some of the ways in which people reacted to, reshaped, resisted and even rejected communism 'from below' and is a testament to the ways in which many individuals and groups responded to

attempts to extend state regulation over their lives by the evasion and manipulation of state law. My own research has indicated that whilst many people turned to petty crime primarily out of necessity; as a 'coping mechanism' to overcome the increasing failings of the planned economy, for others it also represented civil disobedience and subversion, a form of protest against and resistance towards the regimes in power. This fact was recognised by the state authorities, who from the late 1960s, largely condoned this proliferation of 'petty illegalities' both to conceal the worst economic failings of socialism and act as a 'pressure valve' to reduce social tension and provide an outlet for people's frustrations with the regimes.

Finally, the study of crime and deviance under communism is important because many of the trends that were established have continued to shape the East European experience in the post-communist period. When communism collapsed across Eastern Europe in 1989 and in the Soviet Union in 1991, it appeared as though there was a sudden explosion of crime in countries across the former socialist block. While crime levels across the region certainly did rise in response to the upheaval, uncertainty and opportunities provided by the post-communist transition, many of the themes that have come to dominate criminological discourse in post-communist Eastern Europe – such as enduringly low levels of social trust, the proliferation of the underground economy, a tendency to turn to informal exchange networks to get things done, pervasive corruption and bribery and the symbiotic relationship between state authorities and the criminal underworld – are firmly rooted in the experiences of the communist era and can only be fully understood in their historical context. In particular, concerns are consistently raised about levels of organised crime in the region and in the post-Cold War period East European organised crime has frequently been highlighted not just as a domestic problem, but also as a potential security threat by governments, intelligence agencies and law enforcement.

My own research into this area continues to evolve and develop. I am currently working on my first monograph, entitled *The Evolution of the Criminal Underworld in East Central Europe: From the Brezhnev Era to Postcommunism*. In addition I plan to expand my research focus on crime in relation to other aspects of social deviance and 'underground' activities in socialist societies more generally, by developing a collaborative project provisionally entitled 'In the Shadows of Soviet Society: Underground Activities in the Post-Stalin Era'. I am sure that my participation and involvement in the SOLON network will provide an excellent forum for discussion and a chance to explore inter-linkage and exchange thoughts and ideas with other scholars working on related research areas