

# Hitler's Cause is Alive in Former Stalingrad

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The city of Volgograd, formerly Stalingrad, is the site of one of the most significant battles of World War II. To this day, the Battle of Stalingrad, in which approximately two million people were killed, is of great symbolic importance to the city and is commemorated by an 85-meter monument familiar to many around the globe.

It thus seems beyond comprehension that, until recently, Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, together with other radical nationalist literature, was openly sold at certain book stalls in the center of Volgograd; that the birthday of the Nazi leader was openly celebrated by local youngsters at Volgograd's central quay; and that painted or scratched swastikas could be found almost everywhere in the city. In addition, the last five years have seen dozens of incidents in which representatives of ethnic or racial minorities have been abused or even killed for no apparent reason. How could this be possible in the former Stalingrad, the city that paid so many lives to drive away the bearers of swastikas and adherents of racist ideology?

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the Volgograd oblast (or region) experienced difficult socioeconomic conditions: economic crises, the marginalization of large social groups, and uncontrolled migration from unstable areas of Central Asia and the Caucasus. Migration, in particular, is not an entirely new phenomenon: there was always immigration from these regions during the Soviet period. Today, however, the number of migrants has increased considerably, newcomers have been generally less integrated into their social environment, and state and regional policies toward migration and social integration have been ineffective or absent altogether.

Moreover, since approximately the mid-1990s, Caucasian and Central Asian migrants have been perceived by significant parts of the Russian public not as "our people" but as representatives of alien cultures pursuing goals separate from those of the Russian majority and inimical to Russia as a whole. It is thus not so surprising that almost 60 percent of respondents in a summer 2004 survey agreed that "Russia

for ethnic Russians is a sensible, good idea,” and more than 45 percent agreed that “all migrants – legal and illegal – and their children should be deported back to the place from which they came.” Regional media adds fuel to the fire by stressing the ethnic background of criminals in their reporting, and by adopting a lax approach toward individuals or political organizations that regularly express ethnophobic or “migrantophobic” attitudes. Sometimes court examinations follow such publications or public statements, but they usually result only in the issuing of a warning.

It is in such conditions that radical nationalist groups, such as Russian National Unity, appeared in the 1990s. By the beginning of the 2000s, Volgograd stood out in the number of seemingly random abuses against ethnic and racial minorities. In 2001, two Roma were killed by young men; another slaying occurred in April 2006. In 2002, an elderly Kazakh, an Uzbek, and two Tajiks were murdered by skinheads. In 2004, approximately ten merchants from Afghanistan were beaten in an open market, and one man was killed. Together with labor and trade migrants, Asian and African students studying at local universities and institutes also became targets of aggression. Extremists even prefer to attack these students, whom they consider more defenseless and less able to repulse attacks than migrants.

When attacks against individuals from ethnic minorities first began to occur regularly, officials claimed these acts were not related to radical nationalism or racism, only hooliganism or criminality. Only by the end of 2001, due to numerous assaults against foreign students, was the existence of skinheads even semi-officially recognized.

Skinheads are part of the informal Volgograd youth environment that became the main venue for teenagers after the decline of Soviet-era youth organizations (i.e., clubs and hobby groups). Individuals detained for attacks against ethnic minorities are often male teenagers: schoolboys, students from vocational schools, first-year students at universities and academies, and unskilled workers. A large number of aggressive youth groups concentrate in the marginal districts of the city, known already in Soviet times for their high levels of youth crime and teenage clashes. At the start of this decade, soccer matches became one of the main centers of gravity for young extremists, as the provincial soccer team Rotor began to rank among the best Russian teams. Ironically, bankruptcy and the catastrophic failure of this important symbol of regional pride in 2004 had at least one positive consequence: soccer matches ceased to be a central place for young adherents of radical nationalist ideas to gather.

According to law enforcement officials in Volgograd, skinheads and other young adherents of radical nationalist ideologies are poorly organized and united in small groups of no more than several dozen members. However, even if teenage followers of Nazism are not particularly numerous, they are the most known of the youth movements in the region. In a May 2006 survey they were mentioned by 58 percent of respondents; pro-governmental organizations (including the Kremlin-backed *Nashi*) were familiar to no more than 25 percent.

The ideologies of Russian skinheads are eclectic and primitive. They contain a strange combination of radical nationalism and Nazism, united by an historical mythology that includes the idea that Russians and Germans both belong to the same “supreme Aryan race.” Skinheads cannot be easily dissuaded by obvious counterarguments. They are fully prepared to answer such questions as “Why are

you a skinhead if your grandfather fought against the Nazis?" or "Why do you usually attack only one or two people with superior numbers?" While their responses are not particularly profound or sophisticated, they can be sufficient to resist the logical points of their opponents and to transform a rational dispute into an emotional one.

Apart from ideology, a main element of skinhead subculture is music: many of the skinheads' favorite groups, such as the Russian bands Korroziya Metalla, Kolovrat, and Vandal, or foreign groups such as Rammstein and Leibach, are known for their use of German Nazi-style or extremist slogans in their songs. A teenager scratching a swastika on a wall may be a fan of this kind of rock group, but it could also mean that he or she is receptive to extremist ideas.

Fortunately, skinheads are far from being the dominant trend even in Volgograd's informal youth subculture. Neither their music nor their styles of clothing are objects of popular imitation. Among the skinheads' main adversaries are punks and rappers. In several administrative districts of Volgograd oblast in August-September 2006, inscriptions made by rappers on the walls of buildings (peace signs, names of rock groups, and even threats toward "fascists") almost everywhere significantly outnumbered swastikas or other signs of youth Nazi subculture. Punks and rappers have managed to rebuff skinheads on several occasions. On October 29-30, 2005, after concerts held by several anti-fascist groups in the city of Volzhsky, groups of skinheads armed with stones, knives, and bottles tried to attack musicians and spectators but were repelled. As a result, one assailant died and about 20 young neo-Nazis were detained.

The attitudes of regional officials toward youth extremism vary. At the start of the decade, many still preferred to turn a blind eye to the problem, claiming that criminal cases were not related to radical nationalism or racism. However, because of the growing number of scandalous cases, especially those relating to foreign students, the official approach has begun to change, though in some situations former attitudes still persist. Some officials and many ordinary citizens seem to believe that skinheads are a useful force for restraining Caucasian migrants, whom they believe "behave boorishly towards permanent residents" and "deceive them at markets." But even this justification is based on misperception: in the vast majority of cases, it has not been individuals behaving impolitely or market vendors with criminal reputations that have been attacked, but individuals who were guilty solely of having a "non-European appearance."

In recent years, the law enforcement bodies of Volgograd oblast have become more active in the struggle against aggressive nationalism. Several lawsuits have been brought against groups that launched unprovoked attacks on minority representatives. On April 26, 2005, eight teenagers, who in October 2002 beat to death two Tajiks and one Uzbek, were sentenced to terms of imprisonment of four to ten years. Less dangerous teenagers participating in skinhead groups have been placed under police supervision. The police have also strengthened security at dormitories and other places where Asian and African students congregate.

Control over the mass media has also increased somewhat. For the last several years, the Committee for Ethnic and Cossack Issues (a subdivision within the Volgograd provincial government) has monitored regional mass media, informing the local public prosecutor about insults and attacks of a racial nature. The

committee organizes meetings with journalists, where they discuss the ethics of covering ethnic problems.

Apart from restrictive measures, regional officials stress prevention through the proper upbringing of the younger generation. They especially emphasize the virtue of patriotism, from a belief that a true patriot, inspired by the feats of ancestors during World War II, and by the Battle of Stalingrad in particular, could not possibly be an admirer of Nazi-style ideals. Centers and programs to promote patriotism function in schools and institutions of higher education throughout Russia, but regional authorities consider Volgograd to be one of the main centers of patriotic upbringing.

Unfortunately, a patriotic upbringing does not address the problems of radical nationalism and Nazi-style ideals as much as its proponents would like to believe. As the regional newspaper *Inter* observed in September 2006, patriotism in Russia today consists of a complex set of ideals directed overwhelmingly at young males to persuade them to voluntarily join the Russian army. The pattern promoted by a patriotic upbringing does not correspond to modern reality or to the interests and hobbies of modern youth, who often perceive events that happened more than 60 years ago as belonging to the distant past. Meanwhile, not every schoolteacher of modern history is able to persuade a young supporter of Nazi-style ideals that Adolf Hitler was a threat not only to the Bolshevik regime but to Russians as a whole. The reality is that almost all modern Russian schoolbooks describe the aims of Nazi Germany and its leadership toward conquered peoples rather vaguely, while *Mein Kampf*, which skinheads cite knowingly, contains no suggestion of attack against the Russian people, only against Soviet Russia and the Bolshevik regime.

The situation with the teaching of tolerance in schools and universities is even worse. Pupils and students generally have very little knowledge of the culture and traditions of the numerous ethnic minorities of the region. Though tolerance is proclaimed as a value together with patriotism, clear and concrete programs in this field have yet to appear.

In comparison with the actions of official bodies, the efforts of some nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to counteract manifestations of Nazi-style extremism are more effective in some respects. The actions of the Volgograd Hebrew Community Center are especially notable. The center carries out its own monitoring of regional mass media, informing the regional public prosecutor about any public extremist statements. Youth activists from the organization, together with young representatives from the German community center, regularly organize actions to cover over swastikas in Volgograd. The irony of young ethnic Germans painting over Nazi symbols daubed by Russian youngsters in the former Stalingrad is obvious. It is also, however, a good illustration of how some NGOs have had more success than local officials in encouraging tolerance among youth.

Volgograd is not the only Russian city with a problem of Nazi-style radical nationalism, but it is ironic that the problem is so significant in a place that stands as one of the greatest symbols of the fight against Nazism. Regional authorities have declared their intent to struggle with extremists and have taken some measures to counter them. These, however, have not been particularly effective or systematic, and some officials tacitly believe that skinheads can be a useful force for protecting local inhabitants against the kind of "criminal environment" produced by migrants.

Efforts to instill patriotism based on the ideals of the Battle of Stalingrad against the Nazis counteract the spread of Nazi-style ideology only fractionally.

The rise of Nazi-style radical nationalism requires the adoption and implementation of a strategy that includes measures in the fields of social, youth, education, and migrant policy, as well as the support of NGOs that promote tolerance. It is not clear, however, that authorities are eager to adopt serious, long-term, and costly measures to address the problem of Nazi extremism which is often perceived to be exaggerated and not especially significant.

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