Antifa Youth Groups in Saint Petersburg Russia

Abstract
The research enables a description of the (sub)cultural Anti-fa scene, an analysis of how participants enter and progress within the movement and the illumination of important aspects of interpersonal and group interactions. The research also reveals the emergence of new forms of Anti-fa solidarities and explains the meanings, logic and justification provided by members for radical Anti-fa actions. The further development of a youth Anti-fa movement is closely connected to the development of fascistic youth groups; it will continue to develop in parallel with them.

Keywords: Anti-fa, xenophobia, youth, subculture

Introduction
To date there is no academic literature on the Anti-fa movement in Russia; information in the public sphere is thus based on media reporting and commentaries in which the Anti-fascist movement is often portrayed as an extremist organisation. Sometimes the alternative media attempt to present the movement from within and outline a more or less “objective” interpretation of its members. Such attempts include an article in the newspaper, Russkii Reporter (see http://Anti-fa-news.ya.ru/replies.xml?item_no=46&ncrnd=2656) and a series of documentary television programmes. Nonetheless this material lacks any scientifically based conclusions regarding the spontaneous formation of youth Anti-fa groups.¹

The Anti-fascist movement in Russia consists of informal youth groups calling themselves “Anti-fa” as well as organisations such as the Youth Human Rights Movement (abbreviated in Russia as MPD), the Network against Racism and

¹ The first academic study of the anti-fascist movement in contemporary Russia has been completed recently by Mischa Gabowitsch (Princeton University) based on research in a number of Russian provincial cities. A book based on this research is in preparation but not yet published.
Intolerance and the international Memorial Society, which all share anti-fascist ideas. The findings of the research for this case study are based on extensive qualitative data including interviews with young participants in Anti-fa groups and field observations in St. Petersburg. The aim was not to map the whole anti-fascist movement in the city but to explore the specifics of youth protest as manifested by a particular network of anti-fascist activists. On the basis of the research for SAL, it has been possible to determine the political and cultural context and key characteristics in the development of the Anti-fa movement in St. Petersburg. The research facilitated the description of the (sub)cultural Anti-fa scene, an analysis of how participants enter and progress within the movement and the illumination of important aspects of interpersonal and group interactions. The research also reveals the emergence of new forms of Anti-fa solidarities and explains the meanings, logic and justification provided by members for radical Anti-fa actions.

Methods

One six-week period of fieldwork was conducted in Spring 2008. Access to the group was gained through existing contacts in St. Petersburg and contacts provided by scene members in other cities. Prior to the commencement of fieldwork, a survey of the media coverage and self-presentation of the groups (especially via Internet) was conducted. This also facilitated initial contacts – for example, in the case of the neo-Pagan case study – through chat forums. In all cases, snowballing was used to generate new respondents from contacts provided by key informants. The main methodological techniques employed for gathering data for these case studies were:

- web-site analysis
- ethnographic observation
- recorded interviews with respondents
- researcher diaries
- visual mappings of urban space used by the groups using still and video photography

A total of 14 interviews and 1 fieldwork diary were analysed for this case study.

Results

Young people use a wide range of means to make public their Anti-fa identity. These actions include those with strong socially normative associations (e.g., provision of help to vulnerable groups and ecological protection) as well as more contentious actions such as pickets, direct action against ideological enemies and graffiti actions which are often interpreted as anti-social.
Youth Lifestyle Subcultures

- The Internet is a very popular mode of activity as it provides the easiest way of opposing right-wing organisations; neo-fascist sites are hacked into and boneheads uncovered in forums and chats via provocative postings against fascists or, on the contrary, postings of a clearly fascist nature. The aim is to flush out Nazi-skins (either by penetrating the group or by challenging them to meet) and set them up for an Anti-fa attack.

- Also popular are Food Not Bombs actions as they are examples of direct action whose meaning is in the demonstration of the ineffectiveness of a state that prefers to spend money on arms rather than attending to social problems. Groups of young anti-fascists independently collect money to buy vegan foodstuffs and disposable crockery and utensils. Several people prepare the food at home and then take it to the place of the action – usually by train stations where the homeless often live. Leaflets are also handed out giving information about where the next action will be held.

- Graffiti actions usually consist of the painting over of fascist slogans and symbols in entrance ways, on walls and fences and along railway lines. Anti-fa symbols are also drawn, however, using their own, hand-made stencils or stencil templates found on the Internet. Graffiti actions are organised quite often as they are one of the simplest ways of getting involved in direct Anti-fa actions. Sticker actions take place in public places (metro, public transport) and have an informational character. The stickers can also be found in the Internet and virtually every Anti-fa activist has his/her own archive of sticker pictures and templates. In additional sticker pictures are drawn independently in the form of neo-Nazi caricatures. Sticker actions are undertaken by small groups of Anti-fa activists (3-4 people) who place the stickers on already existing advertising materials so as not to damage public transport carriages.

- Meetings and pickets are organised generally in squares or in places where large numbers of people gather. These meetings and pickets usually have an animalistic, ecological or anti-military character and some concrete event, incident or fact links them.

- Military actions are radical direct actions. The Anti-fa organises “patrols” that gather usually by the metro and follow the flows of people coming and going. Having picked out a bonehead or group of boneheads, they mount surprise attacks on them. Usually it is only Anti-fa skinheads and football hooligans who engage in these fights – ordinary young people are involved in such actions only in the role of scouts, looking out for victims or warning the Anti-fa of police presence.

Relations with law-enforcement organs are rather complicated and ambivalent. According to many informants, the Anti-fa is treated as a dangerous subculture,
and their appearance alone (baggy trousers, Anti-fa badges, rapper caps, yashmak scarves, nose piercings and such) is enough to get them stopped and their papers checked. Many key figures in the Anti-fa scene are convinced that many policemen are Nazi-skinhead sympathisers:

… The police are cadets, and there is a section of cadets who fully approve of such things because after work they themselves mix with those people (Nazi-skinheads). Another section just don’t want to create additional problems for themselves; it’s easier to walk away, turn their backs, as they have done many times when I have been there. … (A., 22-year old)

In public discourse, the Anti-fa is almost always associated with acts of hooliganism. Informants stated that often no distinction was made between them and fascist youth groups:

… In Petersburg there is a programme to promote tolerance and counter xenophobia and racism… Everyday tens of thousands of people see on the streets these posters like ‘Petersburg – a city without racism’ or ‘the capital of the family of nations’, but this doesn’t concern anybody. But we were like doing a graffiti action… and it happened that in one archway I was writing, ‘Skinheads against racism’ in Russian, like, and this woman turns into the archway, about 40 years old, typical market dress, and starts squealing wildly at me that like I am worse than the skinheads, and I should get out of there before she called the police. So what can you do with these people? You could give these people 500 newspapers, 1000 leaflets, put the same speech on the television saying racism or fascism is bad 700 times – they wouldn’t give a damn because they are only bothered about themselves. … (M., 21-year old)

**Intragroup relations**

The Anti-fa scene is extremely heterogeneous; people within it often have completely opposed political, subcultural, stylistic and other preferences and interests. It ranges from aggressive Anti-fa-crews to intellectual anarchists, from anti-military activists to aggressive hooligans. They range from 15 to 35 years of age and include those into music including punk rock, ska-punk and hard core. In terms of political preferences, the Anti-fa includes liberals, social democrats, communists, anarchists and even those who have no political conviction or consciously reject politics. All, however, are people who have a particular view of the world and who are, to some degree or other, ideologically grounded. Subculturally Anti-fa includes punks (anarcho-punks, “cultural” punks, Goth punks), skinheads (“Rash” [Red and anarchist] skins, Sharps [Skinheads against racial prejudice] and Trades [Traditional skinheads]), football hooligans, rappers and those who call themselves “civilians”, i.e., ordinary people without any subcultural affiliation. In terms of lifestyles, among the Anti-fa one finds DIYers, straight-edgers and vegans.
Thus Anti-fascism is best understood as a set of ideas around which young people, often with relatively different views, unite at least temporarily:

... Anti-fascism incorporates all kinds of different ideas, that is someone may be an anarchist, someone else a patriot, someone else a vegan... or vegetarian, someone else simply has musical interests, someone else is into communism or Trotskyism; there could even be Hare Krishnas. ...(M., 21-year old)

For most youthful Anti-fa groups, the meaning of their activism is not only in winning space (real and virtual) but in active cultural opposition:

... The rivalry between the Fa [fascists] and the Anti-fa is like the rivalry between two football teams. Whichever team wins over a certain period of time then that team will get more and more fans. ...(M., 21-year old)

Nobody came and said they would teach us how to be anti-fascists, nothing like that. It was just that mixing in punk rock circles led to us notice the behaviour of the extreme right at all kinds of concerts. It became clearer and clearer that those people were actively ... damaging the punk movement, and nobody was doing anything. So we wanted to do something to stop these people being at the concerts, on the streets. ...(M., 21-year old)

The question of the use of force remains the most contentious question in relations between the various strands of young people within Anti-fa groups. Justification for the use of violence towards Nazi-skinheads rests on arguments that “otherwise they don’t understand” or as a counter demonstration of force:

If we kick somebody, then, first of all, he will get back into the swing, to put it crudely, only after some time and, in the meantime, he won’t be doing anything to anybody. Secondly he might get frightened off and, the next time they go somewhere, he’ll say, ‘I’ve got to pick up my mum from the station’ or something and simply won’t go. That’s what we count on. (V., 24-year old)

Views, beliefs and ideology

Notwithstanding the actively declared “political” context, therefore, it is actually cultural opposition which is the key factor in the development of the Petersburg anti-fascist scene since it began to form in response to the cultural activity of fascist groups. In this sense, the Anti-fa groups are unique since, as a rule, “traditional” subcultural movements are specific projects in the sense that their formation does not require a counterculture against which the movement develops. But for the Anti-fa movement, the opposition is self-evident – you are either “Fa” or “Anti-fa”. For this reason, at least a section of the youth Anti-fa groups can be considered a kind of collective resistance to the “boneheads” who are, according to many informants, just former local thugs (gopniki):
The majority of them [Nazi-skinheads] were local thugs; they had no great ideology, and what they had was enough for them. Their whole ideology was 'I hate those who are not like me' starting with foreigners with a different skin colour and shape of eye, and ending with friends who just dressed differently, like punks. (A., 22-year old)

Currently Anti-fa groups are in a state of transformation and this is reflected first and foremost in their attempts to think through their own understanding of anti-fascist ideas. In some cases, their reinterpretations lead to a broadening of the philosophy to mean opposition to all kinds of discriminatory practices including racism, Nazism, anti-Semitism, capitalism and all forms of discrimination (and not only against people but also against animals). And, in these groups, no initial subcultural solidarity is necessary; one can be an anti-fascist and nothing else. Nevertheless, the further development of a youth Anti-fa movement closely connects to the development of fascist youth groups; it will continue to develop in parallel with them.

Conclusions

The Anti-fa scene is an unusual subcultural grouping in that its formation was largely a response – a cultural opposition – to the cultural activity of fascist groups. Perhaps, for this reason, it is an extremely heterogeneous scene which includes individuals with often completely opposed political, subcultural, stylistic and other preferences and interests ranging from aggressive Anti-fa crews to intellectual anarchists, from anti-military activists to aggressive hooligans. The preference for different kinds of action is a particular source of tension within the scene. Thus Anti-fascism is best understood as a set of ideas around which young people, often with relatively different views, unite at least temporarily, and whose future development will run very much in parallel to the development of the extreme right-wing (fascist) youth movement.

References

Hilary PILKINGTON,
University of Warwick, Coventry, CV4 7AL, United Kingdom.
E-mail: H.Pilkington@warwick.ac.uk

Elena OMELČENKO
Scientific Research Centre Region, Pushkinskaya 4a, 118, Ul’ianovsk, Russia.
E-mail: omelchenkoe@mail.ru

Yulia ANDREEVA
Scientific Research Centre Region, Pushkinskaya 4a, 118, Ul’ianovsk, Russia.
E-mail: uliandreeva@mail.ru

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Hilary PILKINGTON
Elena OMELČENKO
Yulia ANDREEVA

„Anti-fa“ jaunimo grupės Sankt Peterburge (Rusijoje)

Santrauka
Tyrimas pateikia subkultūrinės „Anti-fa“ (subkultūrinė sąvoka, reiškianti antifašistus) veiklos analizę, kaip dalyviai į ją įsijungia ir įgyja subkultūrinę patirtį. Tyrėjai analizuoja svarbius tarpasmeninių ir grupinių santykių aspektus. Tyrimas taip pat atskleidžia naujas „Anti-fa“ dalyvių solidarumo formas ir paaškinà radikalių šio judėjimo veiksmų reikšmes, jų logiką. Tyrėjai išsako nuomonę, jog tolimesnė jaunimo „Anti-fa“ judėjimo plėtra yra glaudžiai susijusi su fašistinių jaunimo grupių vystymusi; teigiami, kad šios dvi kryptys ir toliau plėtosi paraleliai.

Tyrimas vyko 2008 m. Sankt Peterburge, tęsėsi 6 savaites. Analizë atlikta remiantis stebėjimų, 14 giluminių interviu, tyrejo dienoraščio ir interneto svetainių duomenimis. Tyrėjai pateikia rekomendacijas institucijoms, dirbančioms su jaunimu, apibūdina šios grupės pagrindinius elgesio bruožus, jai būdingas vertybes, veiklas ir jų reikšmes. Taip pat jie nurodo, jog „Anti-fa“ (kaip ir kitų Rusijoje veikiančių antifašistinio judėjimo grupių, pvz., Judėjimas už jaunimo teises, Judėjimas prieš rasizmą ir netoleranciją) filosofija susieta su opozicija visoms diskriminacinės praktikos rūšims, tokioms kaip rasizmas, nacizmas, antisemitizmas, kapitalizmas.

Raktažodžiai: „Anti-fa“, ksenofobija, jaunimas, subkultūra.