

Skinheads and *Nashi*: What are the reasons for the rise of nationalism amongst Russian youth in the post-Soviet period?

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INTRODUCTION

This article will examine the rise of nationalism amongst young Russians in post-Soviet Russian society. The aim is to analyse the causes of this development amongst two particular groups of young Russians, namely the Russian skinhead movement and the political youth movement *Nashi*. As well as looking into the causes of the rise of nationalism amongst these particular groups, this article will also look at the impact these groups have had in the further spread of nationalism throughout Russian society.

It will be argued that the skinhead movement first emerged as a symptom of wider changes throughout Russian society following the collapse of communism, being part of a general rise in nationalistic and xenophobic attitudes amongst the wider population; meanwhile, *Nashi* actively co-opted nationalists and attempted to use nationalism as a tool for its own devices. Acknowledging the general rise in far-right attitudes, *Nashi* attempted to control them, but in fact predominantly resulted in their spread. In addition, the close ties of *Nashi* to Putin's government could not help but dictate the actions of the group, meaning that it was pressured into following the government's equally ambiguous approach towards Russian nationalism. Finally, the two groups shall be compared, and it will be argued that in recent years the skinhead movement has become increasingly political, and that although it was initially composed of groups of dissatisfied Russian teenagers, it has become a political force in its own right, further disseminating far-right nationalism amongst wider Russian society. In this respect, it will be argued that it is the lack of action on the part of the government which is to a great extent responsible for allowing this upsurge in far-right political activity, which has also led to some cooperation between skinheads and *Nashi*.

There has been a large increase in nationalistic and xenophobic attitudes amongst Russian youth, and Russians in general, since the collapse of the Soviet Union. In addition,

under Putin nationalism has become a conspicuous political and social force. As Marlène Laurelle writes, ‘Russian society [...] has been saturated with the slogan “Russia for the Russians...”’¹ This is well exemplified by the vicious race riots that broke out on Manezh Square in Moscow on December 11 2010. Following the murder of a Spartak Moscow Football Club fan by a group of assailants allegedly from the Caucasus, several days of riots broke out with much of the violence directed against Moscow’s immigrant population, resulting in the deaths of two men and the hospitalisation of more than 20 others.² As Will Englund reported at the time:

Street melees here over the past few days, sparked by the killing of a soccer fan and fueled by nationalists’ hatred of immigrants from the Caucasus, have caught the police and other authorities unprepared for an upsurge of rage that appears to reflect a larger sense of anger in Russian society.³

This is just one example of many racially-motivated violent events which have taken place in Russia in recent years, and given this underlying sense of anger, it is important to understand why there has been an increase in far-right nationalism amongst young Russians. It is according to their beliefs and values that the direction Russia takes in the future will ultimately be dictated. Given the popularity of nationalism in Russia at the time of writing, this sort of far-right ideology could have a large impact on the future of this deeply multiethnic and multicultural country.

Both the Russian skinhead movement and *Nashi* have received large amounts of national and international media attention, providing a wealth of primary sources online regarding both groups. In addition, I have drawn on a range of journal articles and books. A key inspiration for this article has been the work of Hilary Pilkington, Elena Omel’chenko and Al’bina Garifzianova, who have written much on youth in Russian society from the late 1980s onwards. It is hoped that this dissertation can contribute to the ongoing discussion on the issue of nationalism amongst young people in contemporary Russian society by providing a side-by-side analysis and comparison of both the skinhead movement and

¹ Marlène Laruelle, *In the Name of the Nation: Nationalism and Politics in Contemporary Russia*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) p.39.

² Miriam Elder, ‘Two Dead as far-right football fans riot in Moscow’, *The Guardian*, 13 December 2010, <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/dec/13/two-dead-football-racist-riot-moscow>> [accessed 29 March 2015] (paras. 1-3 of 15).

³ Will Englund, ‘Riots in Russia rooted in nationalism, hatred of immigrants’, *Washington Post*, 14 December 2010, <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/12/13/AR2010121305794.html>> [accessed 29 March 2015] (para. 1 of 16).

Nashi. While the relationship between these groups has been discussed in existing academic works, to the best of my knowledge there is no scholarly work as yet comparing and contrasting them.

It is also important to define what is meant by the term ‘nationalism’, as used here. Nationalism itself is defined by Lloyd A. Fallers as ‘an ideological commitment to the pursuit of unity, independence, and interests of a people who conceive themselves as forming a community.’⁴ It is that part of a certain ‘culture which is actively and explicitly concerned with the establishment and defense of patterns of value and belief.’⁵ In the Russian case, nationalism ‘spans a large social spectrum stretching from the racist violence of skinheads and the population’s massive but vague xenophobia, to the elite’s affirmation of cultural and material satisfaction and the middle classes’ beliefs in a better future.’⁶ It would appear, then, that nationalism does not mean the same thing to all people. However, for the purposes of this dissertation the main focus will be on the sort of nationalism that lies at the more extreme end of this spectrum.

I. THE RISE OF THE SKINHEADS

The Russian skinhead phenomenon started as a small subcultural movement in the early 1990s, consisting mostly of teenagers mimicking the style and actions of their western counterparts.⁷ This was symptomatic of a more general trend which encompassed many different youth movements and subcultures following the collapse of the Soviet Union. As the walls of the USSR collapsed, residents of the Russian Federation found themselves more exposed than they had ever been to different Western styles and trends which the Soviet state had, throughout its entire existence, either attempted to control strictly or to ban outright. During the 1990s and 2000s the number of skinheads grew greatly, leading to its current state as a particularly popular far-right subcultural movement.

⁴ Lloyd A. Fallers, ‘Ideology and Culture in Uganda Nationalism’, *American Anthropologist*, 63.4 (1961) <<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1525/aa.1961.63.4.02a00010/abstract>> [accessed 30 March 2015] (p.677).

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 677-678.

⁶ Laruelle, p.13.

⁷ Hilary Pilkington, ‘Introduction: Rethinking skinhead lives’, in *Russia’s Skinheads: Exploring and Rethinking Subcultural Lives*, ed. by Hilary Pilkington, Elena Omel’chenko and Al’bina Garifzianova, (London and NY: Routledge, 2010) pp. 1-22 (p.5).

According to an estimate from the Russian Interior Ministry press service, by 2007 the number of skinheads in Russia numbered over 100,000.⁸ From 2008 onwards Russia experienced a decline in racially motivated street violence as a result of increased government efforts to suppress extremist right-wing groups, particularly in the Moscow region.⁹ Despite this decrease, more recently there has been a noticeable resurgence in skinhead activity, and experts on Russian nationalism at the SOVA Centre for Information and Analysis have predicted that there could be a possible increase in skinhead activity in the coming years as Russian extremist nationalists return from fighting in the recent conflict in Ukraine.¹⁰ This follows an increase in racially motivated violence noticed in 2013, seen as a result of an anti-migrant policy put in place by the authorities which rallied against ‘ethnic crime’, receiving a large amount of media attention and public support.¹¹ By the end of 2013 ‘the decline in street racist violence, which lasted from 2009 to 2012, evidently came to an end.’¹² Given the size of the Russian skinhead movement and its impact upon Russian society, it is important to consider the role of nationalism in the beliefs and actions of those who ascribe themselves to it.

Overt nationalism seems to come part and parcel with skinhead ideology, but it is important to deconstruct this preconception and ascertain to what extent nationalism drives and motivates the actions of these individuals, and what the foundations and reasons are for these beliefs. As well as having an overtly nationalistic agenda, their ideology encompasses more than just patriotic feelings towards the Russian nation. Russian skinheads have famously committed a large number of violent crimes against foreigners in Russia, claiming to be protecting the Russian nation by attacking immigrants, foreign students and Russian citizens who are not ethnically Russian. In addition, skinheads have been known to attack members of different subcultures, such as punks and hip-hop fans, and increasingly in recent years there has been an upsurge in attacks against LGBT Russians

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.9.

⁹ Galina Kozhevnikova, ‘Under the Sign of Political Terror. Radical Nationalism and Efforts to Counteract It in 2009’, *The SOVA Center for Information and Analysis*, (2010) <<http://www.sova-center.ru/en/xenophobia/reports-analyses/2010/03/d18151/>> [accessed 17 February 2015] (para. 2 of 172).

¹⁰ Natalia Yudina, ‘Beware the Rise of the Russian Ultra-Right’, *The SOVA Center for Information and Analysis*, (2014) <<http://www.sova-center.ru/en/xenophobia/reports-analyses/2014/09/d30212/>> [accessed 17 February 2015] (para. 20 of 20).

¹¹ Natalia Yudina and Vera Alperovich, ‘The Ultra-Right Shrugged: Xenophobia and Radical Nationalism in Russia, and Efforts to Counteract Them in 2013’, *The SOVA Center for Information and Analysis*, (2014) <<http://www.sova-center.ru/en/xenophobia/reports-analyses/2014/03/d29236/>> [accessed 19 February 2015] (paras.4-6 of 223).

¹² *Ibid.*, para. 2.

committed by skinheads and neo-nazis.¹³ Whilst skinheads direct much of their violent action against foreigners, they also simply target those they consider unusual – perhaps a contemporary manifestation of groups from the late Soviet period such as the *liubery*.

Members of the *liubery* came from the town of Liubertsy, located 20 kilometres south-east of Moscow, whose culture can be characterised as valuing physical strength and strongly opposing western subcultures, such as punks and hippies.¹⁴ They would often travel to Moscow ‘in order to beat up those of their contemporaries who did not meet their approval.’¹⁵ Like that of skinheads, their fashion style was characteristically working class.¹⁶ Here we find obvious similarities between the *liubery* and skinheads, being overtly macho, distinctively working class and having a distaste for different western styles and subcultures. These are all attributes which constitute part of the skinhead identity whilst not being intrinsically nationalistic. As Alexander Tarasov notes, many of the first skinheads in Russia were not necessarily racist or nationalistic, but rather following a trend.¹⁷

It is undeniable, though, that nationalism and xenophobic attitudes play a strong role in skinhead ideology. In their study of one small group of skinheads in a northern Russian city, Omel’chenko and Garifzianova found that the xenophobic attitudes of many of those within this particular group had been influenced by a ‘general xenophobic background.’¹⁸ This background was particularly important, and as Omel’chenko and Garifzianova note:

for many of the young people choosing a skinhead subcultural identity, their xenophobic attitudes have been shaped by authoritarian adults - parents who frequently spoke negatively about ‘non-Russians’ - or by friends who had come in to the movement earlier.¹⁹

¹³ Nikolai P. Kovalev, ‘Jury Trials for Violent Hate Crimes in Russia: Is Russian Justice Only For Ethnic Russians?’ (2011), *Criminology*, Paper 4 <http://scholars.wlu.ca/brantford_cc/4> [accessed 19 February 2015] pp.669-736 (p.670).

¹⁴ Hilary Pilkington, *Russia’s Youth and its Culture: A Nation’s Constructors and its Constructed*, (London: Routledge, 1994) p.142.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., p.225.

¹⁷ Alexander Tarasov, ‘Porozhdenie Reform: Britogolvie, oni zhe Skinhedny’, *Svobodnaya Mysl*- XXI, 4-5 (2000) Para. 30-31.

¹⁸ Elena Omel’chenko and Al’bina Garifzianova, ‘Skinheads as Defenders of Russia? Power versus Friendship in Xenophobic Youth Subcultures’, in *Subcultures and New Religious Movements in Russia and East-Central Europe*, ed. by George McKay et al. (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009) p.54.

¹⁹ Ibid.

The social, political and economic turmoil of the 1990s left many young Russians with far less support than they had enjoyed in the Soviet period. Tarasov suggests that as many young Russians became frustrated with the lack of opportunities which had previously been offered by institutions such as the Komsomol or the Young Pioneer Palaces, they searched for a scapegoat against which to vent their frustrations, and unable to touch this new generation of privileged Russians with their private security and bodyguards, they turned to foreigners as an easy target.²⁰

As well as being strongly influenced by the attitudes of their friends and family, a broader top-down political influence can be clearly observed impacting on the beliefs and values of skinheads. The 1990s were filled with turmoil and violence; a massive rise in crime and corruption was a distinctive characteristic of the Yeltsin years. This violence even reached the highest levels of the state, evidence of which was the bloody storming of the White House in October 1993 which saw Yeltsin pitted against the Russian parliament in a struggle for power. An unanticipated result of this conflict was that by using force to defuse the situation, Yeltsin had endorsed violence as a way of getting things done, showing that ‘violence is conclusive proof in any discussion’.²¹ Further endorsing the use of force and also increasing tensions between ethnic Russians and non-Russians, particularly Muslims from the southern regions of the Federation, the First Chechen War strongly influenced the nationalistic and racist attitudes of many Russians. The war and the xenophobic campaigns which accompanied it in Moscow greatly contributed to a rise in everyday racism in Russia.²² In Moscow the police began enforcing a kind of ethnic cleansing within the city; by routinely checking the documents, registration and residence permits of ‘suspicious’ looking people (in this instance meaning anyone who appeared like they may be from the Caucasus), the Moscow police were able to deport many immigrants and residents of southern Russia from the city, naming Moscow a territory of ‘special rule’.²³

Omel’chenko and Garifzianova point to the Russian state as having a direct impact on the actions and beliefs of Russian skinheads, arguing that:

²⁰ Tarasov, para. 57.

²¹ Alexander Salagaev et al., ‘From Local to Global: The Transformation of Delinquent and Radical Communities in the Tatarstan Republic of Russia’ in *Subcultures and New Religious Movements in Russia and East-Central Europe*, ed. by George McKay et al. (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009) p.23.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

The strengthening of national patriotic attitudes as politicians search for a new national idea, calls for the revival of the former power of Russia and the construction of a centralised system of power also cannot but encourage the development of xenophobic attitudes especially among socially deprived young people.²⁴

They also add that within the low-trust environment which is prevalent in contemporary Russia, by having only one ultimate source of trust and authority, manifested in the president, ‘the potential sources of threat are immediately multiplied.’²⁵ Despite the ambivalence of many skinheads towards politics and the government’s apparent crackdown on skinhead activity since 2008, there is evidence to suggest that the relationship between the state and skinhead activity is not as black and white as it may first appear.

Between 2010 and 2011, members of the extremist group, the Nationalist Socialist Organisation (NSO), were put on trial for 27 counts of murder, in which many of the victims were foreigners. During this trial it was discovered that the leader of the group, Maksim Bazilev, had 200 million roubles in his bank account, and other members of the group testified that they had been receiving 2500 roubles a month.²⁶ During the trial Bazilev was found dead, having slit his wrists in his cell at the secure headquarters of the Interior Ministry.²⁷ Both of these facts roused suspicion that people with considerable money and power were somehow pulling the strings behind this organisation and were afraid of being caught.²⁸ As Charles Clover acknowledges, it is highly unlikely that the true source of the money and the possible murderer of Bazilev will be discovered, but ‘the NSO has emerged not only as a terror group with a significant propaganda function, but most importantly, one with numerous and not altogether transparent relations with Russia’s political and law-enforcement establishment.’²⁹

Clover has not been the only journalist to accuse the Russian state of cooperating with skinheads. In the run up to the 2008 presidential elections, Mark Ames and Alexander Zaitchik raised the question of whether ‘the rise in skinhead violence is a strictly organic

²⁴ Omel’chenko and Garifzianova, p.54.

²⁵ Ibid. pp.54-55.

²⁶ Charles Clover, ‘The Skinhead Terrorists’, *The Financial Times*, 3 December 2010, <<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/21553438-fcda-11df-ae2d-00144feab49a.html#axzz3SffToQge>> [accessed 24 February 2015] (para. 9 of 50).

²⁷ Ibid., para.11.

²⁸ Ibid., paras. 12-14.

²⁹ Ibid., para. 16.

phenomenon or whether it is being manipulated or even encouraged from above.³⁰ On the other hand, the article also points to the government's apparent attempts to deal with the problem of racially motivated violence, such as its passing of Article 232 which criminalises the incitement of 'ethnic, racial or religious hatred', highlighting the complexity of the issue, and stating that 'the Kremlin has thus been working not simply to manipulate ultranationalism but also to control it, though its motivations are not always clear.'³¹

It is clear, then, that while nationalism became one of the keystones of the skinhead movement, the roots of this ideology are complicated and multifaceted. These attitudes are often passed down to individuals by parents and close acquaintances who have ultranationalistic or xenophobic views, a symptom of everyday racism in Russia. There is also reason to suspect that the state has played some role in spreading these views, even possibly highjacking ultranationalism and influencing the skinhead movement for its own purposes. It is also clear that the difficult social and economic situation that resulted from the troubles of the 1990s provided fuel for the fire, creating an environment of social friction, low trust and increasing racial intolerance, particularly Islamophobia following the First Chechen War. As Tarasov puts it, the rise of the Russian skinhead is a product of social rather than national change.³² The racist and nationalistic attitudes of skinheads seem to be symptomatic of a wider trend happening within Russian society as racial intolerance and nationalism increase their presence and influence. The state's relationship with this kind of nationalism remains one of the most difficult aspects of this phenomenon to understand, and will be addressed further in the final chapter. In the following chapter the political youth movement *Nashi* shall be discussed, looking at the roots of nationalism within the organisation and the impact it has had on spreading it to a broader section of Russia's youth.

II. *NASHI*, 2005-2012

Within the political youth movement *Nashi* (ours) it has been possible to observe a form of state-endorsed nationalism. Whereas the Russian skinhead movement may often have

³⁰ Mark Ames and Alexander Zaitchik, 'Skinhead Violence Rising in Russia', *The Nation*, 29 August 2007, <<http://www.thenation.com/article/skinhead-violence-rising-russia>> [accessed 25 February 2015] (para. 7 of 18).

³¹ *Ibid.*, para. 16.

³² Tarasov, para. 57.

appeared to be indifferent towards politics, groups such as *Nashi* ‘constitute a real political force, which can be used by political parties and individual politicians to achieve their goals.’³³ *Nashi* was first founded in 2005 with backing from the Kremlin to ‘comprise a new political force,’ and its initial goals were ‘(1) to promote Russia’s global leadership in the 21st century, (2) to prepare a ‘revolution of cadres’ in Russia, (3) to educate a new generation of state officials, and (4) to oppose the threat of an ‘orange-revolution’ in Russia’ as well as large amounts of anti-fascist campaigning.³⁴ The group presented a considerable social and political force, having more than 300,000 members at the peak of its popularity between 2007 and 2008.³⁵ The group formally closed in 2012, though various sources at the time reported that the future of the group was uncertain.³⁶ Some subsidiaries of the organisation, including the group *StopHam* (stop a lout), remain active at the time of writing.³⁷ Given the immense popularity it held, it is important to analyse the root causes of the rise of nationalism within the group, and also assess to what extent *Nashi* contributed to the general rise of nationalistic and xenophobic attitudes in modern Russia up until 2012.

In many of its brochures and in its manifesto, *Nashi* took a strong stance against radical nationalism; for example, it has attacked Dmitry Rogozin, formerly the head of now defunct radical nationalist party *Rodina* (Motherland).³⁸ Their manifesto stated that:

Cultural diversity is Russia’s greatest asset in the modern world. Religious and ethnic cooperation empowers our country to develop further... Our generation’s task is to prevent the spread of fascist ideas, aggressive nationalism, religious intolerance and separatism that threatens the unity and territorial integrity of Russia.³⁹

³³ Oleg Belov, ‘*Nashi* versus Nazi: anti-fascist activity as a means of mass youth mobilisation in contemporary Russia’, trans. by Dmitry Borodin, *Anthropology of East Europe Review*, 26.2 (2008) <<http://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/aeer/article/view/424/499>> [accessed 28 March 2015] (p.48).

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Maya Atwal, ‘Evaluating *Nashi*’s Sustainability: Autonomy, Agency and Activism’, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 61.5 (2009) <<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/09668130902904878>> [accessed 28 March 2015] (p.743).

³⁶ Olga Kuzmenkova and Ekaterina Vinokurova, ‘Nashikh zakryvayut’, *Gazeta.ru*, 6 April 2012, <http://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2012/04/06_a_4151693.shtml> [accessed 19 April 2015] (paras. 1-2 of 22).

³⁷ Evgeny Shipilov, ‘Nakhamili na ugovnoye delo’, *Gazeta.ru*, 3 May 2012, <http://www.gazeta.ru/auto/2012/05/03_a_4571421.shtml> [accessed on 21 April 2015] (para. 1 of 14).

³⁸ Belov, p.50.

³⁹ *Nashi*, as cited by Maya Atwal and Edwin Bacon, ‘The youth movement *Nashi*: contentious politics, civil society and party politics’, *East European Politics*, 28.3 (2012) <<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/21599165.2012.691424>> [accessed on March 2015] (p.261).

This belief is reflected in some of their actions, for example in 2009 ‘around 30,000 young Russians came together in Moscow for *Nashi*’s “Russian March” in defiance of right-wing and extreme nationalist organisations marching under the same banner elsewhere in Moscow.⁴⁰ Nationalist figures were often labelled as fascists by the group, though as Oleg Belov notes from his interactions with members of *Nashi*, many of them were unable to distinguish between radical nationalism and fascism.⁴¹ Despite this anti-fascist and anti-nationalist rhetoric, ‘its critics have compared it to radical far-right groups and at times referred to it as a fascist group itself.’⁴² This is due to the fact that ‘*Nashi*’s apparent efforts to quell radicalism and extremism sit uneasily alongside attempts to deliberately play on nationalistic sentiment in order to attract and inspire young Russians to its cause.’⁴³ In 2007 *Nashi* worked together with United Russia’s youth wing, *Molodaya Gvardia* (Young Gard), to combat dissenters’ marches. They used the slogan “Russian for the Russians”, which, although representing the movements’ desire to keep out foreign influence on Russian politics and to associate the opposition marches with Western sponsorship, is also a slogan employed by far-right groups.⁴⁴ This is an example of how, in some instances, *Nashi* seems to encourage far-right nationalism rather than quell it. Maya Atwal and Edwin Bacon suggest a convincing explanation for *Nashi*’s flirtation with nationalism; due to the fact that nationalistic and xenophobic attitudes have been on the rise in Russia throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the Kremlin has been faced with the danger of extreme nationalism growing outside of its control, and as a result *Nashi* was tasked with co-opting these young nationalists in order to have some degree of control or influence over them.⁴⁵

The strong line which *Nashi* took against foreign influence upon Russian matters impacted on the rise of nationalism amongst young Russians. In 2006 the British ambassador to Moscow, Anthony Brenton, attended a conference of Russian opposition parties, but following the event was consistently harassed by members of *Nashi*.⁴⁶ They stalked Brenton for months, calling for him to apologise for the meeting.⁴⁷ Disapproval of foreign influence was characteristic of *Nashi*’s ideology and identity, and as Atwal notes, for

⁴⁰ Atwal and Bacon, p.261.

⁴¹ Belov, p.50.

⁴² Atwal and Bacon, p.261.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p.262.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Arkady Ostrovskyin, ‘Youth group hounds UK Moscow ambassador’, *Financial Times*, Decemer 8 2006, <<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/15054982-8661-11db-86d5-0000779e2340.html#axzz3VfrSgTBN>> [accessed 28 March 2015] (para. 6 of 19).

⁴⁷ Ibid., (para. 4).

those who approved of the group it simply represented ‘a defensive strategy adopted in response to external threats to the beleaguered Russian nation.’⁴⁸ The ultimate enemy of *Nashi* was ‘the loosely identified external threat of a Western-sponsored “liberal-fascist alliance” which is against a strong, autonomous Russia.’⁴⁹ Indeed, in *Nashi*’s manifesto it was written that:

Only by spreading our ideological influence over the younger generation can we prevent young people from being drawn into extremist organisations of a fascist and liberal tendency [...] The war on fascism is part of the fight for Russia’s integrity and sovereignty.⁵⁰

Here we see all of *Nashi*’s traditional enemies mixed together, and whilst promoting inter-ethnic tolerance, at the same time it actively denounces foreign influence.⁵¹ The fight against extremism and foreign influence is equated with guarding Russia’s own integrity and sovereignty, and such rhetoric describing Russia as the victim of external enemies can only help feed nationalistic attitudes and foster negative attitudes towards foreigners, fitting in with *Nashi*’s apparent ‘nationalist-patriotic agenda.’⁵² Demonstrating that Russia is a victim of oppressive external powers is a powerful device that has been used at various points throughout Russian history to help create national solidarity, and on which nationalism can be built, ‘by instilling the sense of unity through emphasizing common suffering of the Russian nation.’⁵³

Nashi enjoyed great support from United Russia and Putin’s government. As a result, the group received considerable Western media attention, and many writers saw *Nashi* as a tool of the regime. For example, Steven Lee Myers at the New York Times commented on the group saying that their purpose ‘is the ideological cultivation- some say

⁴⁸ Atwal, p.746.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ *Nashi*, as cited by Atwal and Bacon, p.261.

⁵¹ Atwal and Bacon, p.261.

⁵² Julie Hemment, ‘Soviet-Style Neoliberalism? *Nashi*, Youth Voluntarism, and the Reconstructing of Social Welfare in Russia’, *Problems of Post-Communism*, 56.6 (2009) <<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.2753/PPC1075-8216560604>> [accessed 29 March 2015] (p.38).

⁵³ Murod Isamilov and Nozima Ganieva, ‘In Search for the Russian National Identity: Do History Textbooks Hold the Answer?’, *Journal of Alternative Perspectives in Social Sciences*, 5.2 (2013) <<http://www.japss.org/upload/5.%20Isamilov.pdf>> [accessed 1 April 2015] p.373.

indoctrination - of today's youth, the first generation to come of age in post-Soviet Russia.⁵⁴ The role of the government in driving the beliefs and actions of *Nashi* cannot be ignored, the group had been so closely tied to Putin's regime that it has been likened by observers to Putin's own form of the Hitler Youth.⁵⁵ Given Putin's own relationship with nationalism, which is at times as hard to understand as *Nashi's*, it is easier to explain some of the group's actions. Since the earliest days of his presidency, particularly during his 2007-2008 election campaign, Putin has argued 'that the precondition of Russia's recovery was that Russians take pride in their nation.'⁵⁶ Such rhetoric has a clear nationalistic sentiment, yet throughout his presidency Putin has decried nationalism, whilst instead promoting patriotism. Nationalism is defined as 'systematically extremist, while any moderate expression of national sentiment made under the label of patriotism is considered not only respectable, but also necessary.'⁵⁷ Putin and United Russia's control over the patriotic label is what gives them the ability to name any opposition as either 'traitors to the nation' or 'nationalist extremists.'⁵⁸

When noting that the Kremlin itself has been using nationalistic rhetoric, whilst at the same time denouncing nationalism as 'extremism', it is possible to observe close similarities to *Nashi's* own conflicted approach to nationalism. Many of *Nashi's* activities were social projects, with a particular focus on supporting and caring for military veterans.⁵⁹ As Julie Hemment notes, 'many of its campaigns have a strong nationalist-patriotic element, and many involve honoring Soviet history, specifically the Great Patriotic War.'⁶⁰ In addition, those who attended *Nashi* camps could go to lectures 'given by nationalist scholars and publicists.'⁶¹ This certainly seems to be a form of 'ideological cultivation', as suggested by Myers.⁶² Nationalistic, or patriotic ideology was manifested in their actions, be that harassing ambassadors or focussing their attention on war veterans who are valued for having defended the motherland. These factors can partially account for the rise in

⁵⁴ Steven Lee Myers, 'Youth Groups Created by Kremlin Serve Putin's Cause', *The New York Times*, July 8 2007 <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/08/world/europe/08moscow.html?pagewanted=all&_r=2&> [accessed 29 March 2015] (para. 11 of 35).

⁵⁵ Reuben F. Johnson, 'The Putin Jugend', *The Weekly Standard*, July 31 2007, <<http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/013/938alwas.asp?page=2>> [accessed 29 March 2015] (p.2).

⁵⁶ Laruelle, p.142.

⁵⁷ Laruelle, p.144.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p.145.

⁵⁹ Hemment, p.46.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Myers, para. 11.

nationalism amongst Russian youth, as many of the actions that members of *Nashi* took part in seem to have had some sort of nationalistic-patriotic ideology underpinning them, passed down from United Russia.

In conclusion, *Nashi* formally stood strongly against far right nationalism whilst acknowledging Russia's cultural diversity as one of its greatest strengths. Yet despite this, the group promoted a nationalist-patriotic ideology, using it as an instrument for attracting young people to sign up. As Atwal and Bacon note, '*Nashi* taps into and cultivates nationalism, despite the danger that it acknowledges chauvinism among youth to present to Russia.'⁶³ It seems that *Nashi* turned to nationalism due to the changing attitudes in Russian society as nationalistic and xenophobic attitudes became more prevalent. Though it could be argued that the group was simply another manifestation of the changes in attitudes of Russians in post-Soviet society, the manner in which *Nashi* interacted and used far-right nationalism directly contributed to the rise of nationalism amongst young Russians. Due to their proximity, the role of the state in determining the actions of *Nashi* also cannot be ignored given the government's own complicated relationship with Russian nationalism. What can be concluded is that *Nashi* certainly had an impact on the spread of Russian nationalism amongst Russian youth; it did this by spreading negative views towards foreigners and foreign influence amongst its members, and also by organising special activities for its members with the purpose of ideological indoctrination. One of the clearest examples of its role in the rise of far-right nationalism amongst young Russians is the cooperation which the group had with skinheads, a topic which will be addressed in the following chapter as I compare the two groups and look at the changing role of the skinhead movement.

III. COMPARISONS

The previous two chapters have dealt with the skinhead movement and *Nashi* separately, analysing each of their relationships to nationalism independently of one another. In this chapter the skinhead movement and *Nashi* shall be compared and contrasted, looking at dissimilarities and similarities between the ideologies and actions of the two groups. In this respect collaboration between *Nashi* and the skinhead movement will be addressed, exemplifying the contribution of both groups to the rise of nationalism amongst young

⁶³ Atwal and Bacon, p.261.

Russians whilst demonstrating the closeness of the two groups. Following on from this, it will be shown that in recent years the skinhead movement has come to play an increasingly political role in Russian society, similar to that of *Nashi*. It will be argued that the skinhead movement has become an active contributor to the rise of far-right nationalism amongst Russian youth, rather than being simply symptomatic of a wider societal trend as it once was. With respect to this trend, it will also be mentioned that the Russian government paved the way for this shift within the Russian skinhead movement.

On the face of things, the skinhead movement and *Nashi* seem to greatly differ in their ideological approach to Russian nationalism. Skinheads are typically more distinctly far-right wing; in a study of a group of skinheads in the town of Vorkuta in the Komi Republic, for example, Pilkington found that the skinhead ideology was based upon racist and or neo-fascist views, if not both, which were underpinned by the ideologies of white supremacism, neo-Nazism and ‘a central palingenetic myth that lies at the core of fascism.’⁶⁴ *Nashi*’s own brand of nationalism seems far less extreme, given the fact that the group formally opposed far-right nationalism and extremism of any kind. Nonetheless, *Nashi* was content to use nationalism as a tool for recruiting more young people to its ranks, something which ‘sits uneasily’ next to its attempts to allegedly temper extremism.⁶⁵ Ultimately, however, it appears that *Nashi* clearly had an impact on the rise of nationalism amongst Russia’s youth, possessing the motive of controlling and co-opting nationalists into its ranks as a result of the upsurge in popularity of nationalism throughout Russian society. On the other hand, the skinhead movement, for much of its existence, seems to have been more symptomatic of a general trend underway throughout Russian society – an extreme example of the rise of nationalism and xenophobia in Russia, but not necessarily a group that has been actively spreading its message in the same way as *Nashi*.

However, despite their apparent differences, at one of *Nashi*’s early conferences Vasily Yakemenko, the founder of *Nashi*, encouraged the recruitment of skinheads into the group on the grounds of them being fellow Russian patriots.⁶⁶ In 2006, *Gazeta.ru* reported that prominent members of *Nashi* had been at the head of different football clubs’ supporters’ groups with connections to skinheads and football hooligans, such as *Nashi*

⁶⁴ Hilary Pilkington, ‘“Skinhead is a movement of action”: Ideology and political engagement’, in *Russia’s Skinheads: Exploring and Rethinking Subcultural Lives*, ed. by Hilary Pilkington, Elena Omel’chenko and Al’bina Garifzianova, (London and NY: Routledge, 2010) pp. 99-120 (p.99).

⁶⁵ Atwal and Bacon, p.261.

⁶⁶ Charles Clover, ‘Managed nationalism’ turns nasty for Putin, *The Financial Times*, 23 December 2010, <<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/046a3e30-0ec9-11e0-9ec3-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3VfrSgTBN>> [accessed 28 March 2015] (paras. 25-26 of 44).

organiser Aleksei Mitryushin, who had been in charge of CSKA Moscow fan club Gallant Steeds.⁶⁷ Skinheads have also been actively brought into the group to work as its security force.⁶⁸ In addition, there have been claims from various associations for the defence of human rights which have stated that *Nashi* has participated in ‘training skinheads for attacks in Tsaritsyno’.⁶⁹ Such activities, of course, seem to contravene *Nashi*’s mission statement which takes a strong position against far-right nationalism, but by working together with such groups it can be argued that *Nashi* cannot help but endorse far-right nationalism, and as a result, create room for those with more extreme views to influence the politics and ideology of *Nashi*, particularly in the case of those who held considerable influence over the group, such as Mitryushin.

Despite the origins of the skinhead movement being formed around young Russians who were responding negatively to an increasingly difficult living situations, Peter Worger argues that:

In recent years, the Russian skinhead movement, once consisting only of groups of marginalized youth acting out adolescent aggression, has grown to become part of a right-wing populist movement in the country and has imbued mainstream political discourse with an increasingly racist and xenophobic tinge.⁷⁰

The growing influence of skinhead groups cannot be ignored, as even though they might lack the organisational structure of *Nashi*, their impact on society is increasingly large. It is important to note that as the skinheads’ attitudes towards foreigners do not necessarily differ from those of many ordinary Russian citizens, the movement is representative of a considerable portion of the general public in Russia. What can be observed is that, similarly to how *Nashi* vied for further support, ‘the undercurrent of nationalism and xenophobia in both state and skinhead ideology, misunderstood and underestimated for so long, has become an issue that both state and alternative political parties use to capture the attention of a xenophobic Russian populace.’⁷¹ As demonstrated, skinheads often worked together

⁶⁷ Ilya Barabanov, “‘Gladiatorii’ vzyali “Nashih” v koltso’, *Gazeta.ru*, 26 July 2006, <http://www.gazeta.ru/2006/07/26/oa_209511.shtml> [accessed 28 March 2015] (para. 7 of 13).

⁶⁸ Robert Hovarth, *Putin’s Preventative Counter-Revolution*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013) pp. 102-103.

⁶⁹ Laruelle, p.68.

⁷⁰ Peter Worger, ‘A mad crowd: Skinhead youth and the rise of nationalism in post-communist Russia’, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 45 (2012) <<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0967067X1200061X>> [accessed 30 March 2015] (p.276).

⁷¹ Ibid.

with *Nashi*, using the main resource at their disposal, violence, which ‘is the central method by which skinheads express themselves and their beliefs.’⁷² Worger asserts that as the skinhead movement became more political it began directing this violence not only towards immigrants, but also against other groups which stood against its ideology.⁷³ The group seems to have acquired a more political motivation behind many of its actions, as demonstrated through its cooperation with *Nashi*. In addition, the use of some elements of far-right skinhead ideology by the state has served to further politicise the issues of nationalism and xenophobia. As such, the skinhead ideology has begun to have a more direct impact on the rise and spread of nationalism amongst a broader spectrum of young Russians through *Nashi*’s cooperation with the group and the government’s use of elements of this far-right ideology.

The Russian government has played a central role in the increased politicisation of the skinhead movement. Mihai Varga suggests that the government has contributed to the rise in far-right nationalism in three distinct ways. The first of these is the failure on the part of the Russian government to enforce the law against far-right violence; Varga notes that despite the high level of arrests made against far-right extremists, including skinheads, ‘authorities often give perpetrators conditional sentences only, and they prosecute and convict only a few perpetrators in Moscow and St Petersburg where more than half of the country’s far-right attacks are committed.’⁷⁴ He also notes that often the authorities sympathise with the actions of the perpetrators.⁷⁵ The second cause which Varga identifies is the failure on the part of the authorities to punish instigators of hate crimes, particularly when they are formal organisations.⁷⁶ The third and final cause is the collaboration between government organisations and skinheads, and in this respect he highlights *Nashi* as a particularly good example, saying that ‘activities of organisations created by the government that allow dialogue with right-wing extremists, show that in principle the government does not consider right-wing violence a problem.’⁷⁷ All of these factors contribute to what nears endorsement of far-right actions, though as Varga notes:

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Mihai Varga, How Political Opportunities Strengthen the Far Right: Understanding the Rise in Far-Right Militancy in Russia’, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 60.4
<<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/09668130801999854>> [accessed 30 March 2015] p.572.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p.573.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

The state and the party of power in Russia probably did not intend to directly support far-right organisations in their actions. Instead, what created state-induced opportunities of far-right actions was the ideological closeness of the party in power to the positions of the far right; the difference is that the government prefers other methods of fighting “illegal immigration” and follows direct objectives.⁷⁸

Despite this, what can be observed is that the government has allowed for the skinhead movement to take on an more political role, increasing its similarities to political youth movements such as *Nashi*. By allowing *Nashi* to work together with skinheads for the realisation of common goals, similarities between the two groups could only grow. Though Varga suggests that the Russian government may not have intended to directly support far-right groups in such a manner, there was evidence to suggest otherwise. For example, Vasily Yakemenko, founder of *Nashi* and who encouraged the recruitment of skinheads into the organisation, was made the head of the Federal Youth Agency in 2007, indicative of his proximity to the Russian government.⁷⁹ Worger also argues that due to the activities of disinterested and corrupt government officials who have not cracked down on the skinhead movement, ‘the two groups often overlap and as the skinhead movement blurs into mainstream culture so too may the ultra-right into mainstream politics.’⁸⁰ On the subject of the the increasingly close relationship between the Russian government and skinheads, it is noted by Clover that:

Gangs of skinheads and football fans have in recent years become the nucleus for a Kremlin-backed political movement designed to control the streets and prevent a confrontation with democratic political forces in the wake of the “Rose” and “Orange” revolutions in George and Ukraine- which saw democratic movements sweep entrenched regimes from power almost effortlessly.⁸¹

Such a description of the skinhead movement is very similar to ones previously given for *Nashi*, which was often described by Western observers as a group used by the Kremlin to

⁷⁸ Ibid., p.575.

⁷⁹ Ekaterina Vinokurova, ‘Yakemenko menyayet pirozhki na Seliger’, *Gazeta.ru*, 15 May 2013, <http://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2013/05/15_a_5323293.shtml> [accessed on 25 April 2015] (para. 13 of 21).

⁸⁰ Worger, p.276.

⁸¹ Clover, para. 21.

counteract ‘street politics’ which became increasingly common in the 2000s as opposition groups went out onto the streets ‘to engage in contentious activity.’⁸² This further demonstrates how the role of the skinhead movement has become increasingly similar to that of *Nashi*, and it seems that the Russian government is directly supporting this shift. This overlap between the skinhead movement and the Russian government can also offer a possible explanation to the curious case of Maxim Bazilev, the former head of the NSO, mentioned in the first chapter. The possibility of such direct cooperation between the Russian government and organisations as extreme as the NSO is a worrying possibility, but some of the actions of the Russian government, seemingly supporting and allowing space for these groups to develop, have given some credence to this theory.

In conclusion, it seems that in recent years the role of the skinhead movement has become increasingly similar to that of *Nashi*. It now represents a palpable political force which is actively contributing to the spread of nationalism amongst Russia’s youth. Cooperation between the skinhead movement and *Nashi* is one particular example of the changing role of the skinhead movement, not only providing muscle for *Nashi*, but people with direct connections to the skinhead movement have gained high positions in *Nashi*’s organisational structure. Varga demonstrates that the lenience on the part of the government has also allowed the skinhead movement to become more influential. As well as this, the Russian government itself has used far-right rhetoric to appeal to an increasingly nationalistic and xenophobic Russian population, demonstrating the spread of the skinhead ideology into Russian politics. As the skinhead movement has recently played an increasingly similar role to that of *Nashi*, for example by taking part in ‘street politics’ for the benefit of the Kremlin, the potential influence of the group over Russia’s youth has only extended.

CONCLUSION

The Russian skinhead movement began as various groups of teenagers reacting to the difficulties of living in post-Soviet society. The rise of nationalism amongst these young people was, to a great extent, prompted by the attitudes of those around them, a result of the everyday racism which is so common in contemporary Russia. Despite this, it is important to note that since its beginnings the skinhead movement has not been solely

⁸² Atwal and Bacon, p.257.

nationalistic. In their strongly negative views on homosexuals and different western subcultures, it is possible to observe a distaste for anything that is perceived as unusual or different. Despite this, nationalism and xenophobia are central to the skinhead movement and, in many ways, the skinhead movement is representative of a larger phenomenon, an extreme manifestation of the nationwide rise in far-right attitudes in the post-Soviet period. Viewed in this way, it seems that skinheads were a symptom of a broader phenomenon rather than a cause of it. The ultimate causes of the general rise in nationalistic and xenophobic views were ones that affected Russian society as a whole, such as the economic crisis in the 1990s and the wave of propaganda which accompanied the Chechen Wars.

Nashi, however, played a much more direct role in the rise of nationalism amongst Russian youth. Despite its formal position, which stands strongly against far-right nationalism or extremism of any kind, *Nashi* has evolved into a distinctly nationalistic organisation. The group appealed to the ever increasing nationalistic portion of Russia's youth, attempting to control and manage it. Consequentially, it seems that *Nashi* has only served to disseminate nationalism further amongst young Russians rather than to quell it. Although it could be argued that the increased use of nationalism by *Nashi* is also simply symptomatic of wider trends underway throughout Russian society, the way in which *Nashi* has directly and consciously interacted with nationalism suggests that the group has very actively contributed to the overall rise of far-right attitudes amongst young Russians.

Despite the apparent differences between the skinheads and *Nashi*, more recently the skinhead movement has become conspicuously political. Through cooperation with this far-right movement, *Nashi* and Putin's government could not help but endorse extreme nationalism and allow for such an ideology to impact their own organisations. The actions of the Russian government have served to allow the skinhead movement to further its cause; as a result of not cracking down on the movement, its influence has only grown. There is also evidence to suggest that connections exist between the Russian skinhead movement and individuals who wield considerable power and influence, as demonstrated through the case of the mysterious death of Maksim Bazilev. What can be concluded is that through its increasingly political role, the skinhead movement has come to more closely reflect *Nashi* as an active contributor to the rise of nationalism amongst young Russians.

To conclude, both the Russian skinhead movement and *Nashi* have greatly contributed to the rise of Russian nationalism. Following the upsurge in nationalistic and xenophobic attitudes amongst the Russian population, both the skinhead movement and *Nashi* embraced nationalism as distinct parts of their political agendas by actively spreading

the ideology amongst Russia's youth, particularly in the Putin period. The Russian government has also played a substantial role in the rise of nationalism; given the cooperation between skinheads and *Nashi*, it appears that the Russian government has not only allowed, but encouraged, both groups to further spread nationalism amongst Russia's younger generations. The rise of far-right nationalism amongst this section of the Russian population will ultimately present challenges for the future of the multiethnic and multicultural Russian nation. For future academics it will become increasingly important to observe the impact these generations have on those younger than them, and the direction that the Russian nation takes in the long run as members of today's youth begin to take positions of power and influence in Russian society.

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