



New book investigates Russian mafia

By Julia May

SHSU News Service

— For followers of crime drama, the word mafia might produce images of unspeakable violent acts and gun battles in the streets of major U.S. cities, reminiscent of scenes from “The Godfather” movies. However, there is a different mafia functioning quietly yet successfully in the United States, and its operations could possibly be affecting every American either directly or indirectly. This mafia, driven more by the desire to acquire money rather than territory, is collectively known as the Russian mafia, although those involved are from other post-Soviet countries as well, according to a new book by Joe Serio.

Serio, a criminal justice doctoral student at Sam Houston State University and project manager in the Correctional Management Institute of Texas, has spent almost 20 years studying Russian language, culture and crime.

The book, “Investigating the Russian Mafia,” is scheduled to be available today.

Serio will sign books Friday from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. at Fat Boys Restaurant, located at 1932 Sam Houston Avenue in Huntsville.

Following the book signing, Serio will perform with The Mixed Review, a musical group with whom he plays the guitar and harmonica.

He taught himself how to play the harmonica while he lived in Moscow and played for a time with a Russian rock band.

“Oddly enough, in addition to playing in Moscow clubs I ended up playing private evenings for KGB agents,” Serio said. “What made it so bizarre was that on the one hand these guys were slitting throats in Afghanistan in the ’80s and now here they were enjoying my music.”

Serio lived in Russia for seven years. He first went to Russia in 1986 as a tourist. He returned the following year as a student in a Russian language school in Moscow.

In the early 1990s, he served an internship with the Soviet police prior to the collapse of the USSR.

Later, he became a security consultant to a global corporate investigation and business intelligence firm and served as director of the firm's Moscow office overseeing investigations across the former Soviet Union.

While studying for his master's degree at the University of Illinois at Chicago, he was employed to work in the Office of International Criminal Justice at the university by Richard Ward.

Ward later came to Sam Houston State University as dean of the College of Criminal Justice and was recently named dean of the Henry C. Lee College of Criminal Justice and Forensic Sciences at the University of New Haven.

Ward was in the process of establishing relationships with law enforcement personnel around the world.

In 1989, he began a relationship with the Soviet police who sent two of their top organized crime officials to Chicago to meet with Ward.

They agreed to an exchange program and because Serio spoke Russian, he was selected to serve an internship at the Sixth Department for Organized Crime Control under the Ministry of Internal Affairs in Moscow for a year.

It was during this time that he became interested in the Russian mafia.

In “Investigating the Russian Mafia,” Serio discusses how small cells within the organization have come to the United States to set up a white-collar version of organized crime.

“The circumstances under which they existed during Communist domination forced them to become expert manipulators,” said Serio, “and to them, America is a huge cookie jar of opportunities.”

Although groups are still involved in crimes such as human, drug and weapon trafficking, they have become especially good at crimes of fraud and deception.

“When they first arrive in the United States, they get as much documentation as they can and make themselves legal,” Serio said. “They set themselves up in respectable, legitimate professions then they conduct illegal activities such as filing false medical insurance claims and staging automobile accidents.” During his research Serio discovered that according to a New York state official, every driver in New York pays an extra \$200 a year for the privilege of driving because of insurance fraud.

“The Russian mafia is at the top of the list for orchestrating that outcome because of their activities,” Serio said.

So that no one is misled by the movie industry portrayal of the Russian mafia as crime lords only on the East and West coast of the United States, Serio said that indicators show they have activity in almost every state, including Texas.

He cites examples in his book of rural border activity as well as “big city” operations.

He points out that law enforcement officials are concerned about the organization, but because so much attention has been directed to Al-Qaeda and terrorism since 9/11, the Russian mafia hasn’t had near the focus that it did during the 1990s.

“The problem with organized crime in the 21st century is that these crime groups are starting to consolidate across the United States,” he said. “The Russians are joining the rest of the criminal world — not taking over.”

Serio said that while writing the book he had several audiences in mind, including college students and law enforcement officials.

“I hope that not only will it be understandable and enjoyable, but that it’s different from other books about the Russian mafia in that it explains how the organization developed in terms of history, culture and economics, as well as why it has been so successful in the modern world.”

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