‘If you want to live, you better know how to fight’: Punk fighting and street life in Vorkuta and St Petersburg

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Punk as practice

Of all the things to study in punk, why fighting?

• Our study of punk in post-socialist space led to the conclusion that punk today is not a discrete cultural form contained within stylistic boundaries or social groupings.

• By shifting our gaze from the question of form to that of substance, we see that punk today is experienced and enacted as a diverse range of cultural practices.

• These practices are not only ‘spectacular’, style-based practices but a much broader range of everyday communicative, musical, territorial, sporting, educational, informal economy and alcohol and drug using practices. **Fighting is one of these practices.**

• These practices of punk are profoundly embedded in social structures and local contexts. The ways in which different scenes are shaped by these contexts can be uncovered through a comparison of particular practices in different places.
Situating punk fighting in the literature

- Violence and ritual fighting has been considered primarily in relation to ‘deviant’ rather than ‘spectacular’ subcultures. Violence is seen as rooted in a sense of territoriality ‘deeply ingrained in most working-class parent cultures’ (Robins and Cohen, 1978: 74).

- The exception is the study of skinhead culture where fighting is understood to be central to group solidarity and identity; demonstrates loyalty to the group and further one’s reputation (Moore, 1994: 66).
‘Staged fighting’: the situational nature of violence

- More recently, this kind of violence has been categorised as ‘audience-oriented’ or ‘staged’ fighting (Collins, 2009). Collins suggests that audience-oriented fighting is most frequently encountered at entertainment venues, bars and parties.

- This is helpful for thinking about fighting among ‘spectacular’ subcultural practices; gigs, clubs etc might be seen as sites of territorialism where groups protect ‘their’ space against invasion by incompetents or ‘others’.

- Collins’s focus on the situational and interactional nature of violence facilitates the understanding of violence within the punk scene, which may be categorised as ‘audience-oriented violence’ but is not necessarily perpetrated for the purposes of initiation or ritual.
Three characteristics of punk fighting are explored here.

1. **The interactional nature of violence** indicated by the dominant narrative of fighting on both scenes as a ‘response’ to attack (from ‘local thugs’, from ‘skinheads’).

2. **The relationship between fighting and ideology.** This is discussed through examples of solidarities with both anti-fascist and racist skinhead groups that reflect the traditionally ambiguous political positioning of punk.

3. **The chaotic and opportunistic nature of punk violence.** This mode of fighting is articulated as intensely pleasurable but through a peculiar narrativisation of punk fighting as **tales of ‘heroic incompetence’** that constitute an important resource for ironic story-telling.
Context and method: Vorkuta

- Data set: 18 interviews; field diaries; photos and video; social networking site and email communication; art work; lyrics.
- Respondent set (n= 26): 23 were male, 3 were female; aged 17 years to 43 (majority were 17-22); one third were working, a third were still in education, 5 were unemployed; Modal educational status was vocational education (PTU/tekhnikum).
Context and method: St Petersburg

- Data set: 15 interviews: field diaries; photos and video; social networking site and email communication; art work; lyrics.

- Respondent set (n= 34): 25 were male, 9 were female.; aged from 17 to 49; the majority had, or were studying for, higher educational degrees; half earned their living from the scene, others worked in management, entertainment and IT.

Tina, St Petersburg, April 2010
1. Punks as victims: Interactional violence

• Fighting on punk scenes was largely interactional, taking place when defending oneself against attacks that usually occurred when individuals were readily identifiable as ‘punks’ (for example before or after concerts).

• The scenes differed, however, in both the prevalence of reactive fights and in the identification of the most common aggressors.

• Fights were mentioned twice as often by Vorkuta than St Petersburg respondents.
Vorkuta: Fighting the ‘grey mass’

• Attacks were attributed to local thugs (gopniki) or ‘gangsters’ (bandity) who targeted youth with alternative appearance.

• These encounters are often accompanied by complaints that the ‘gopota’ attack when they have numerical superiority.

• Punks are a target of gopnik violence because of their non-conformity to gang culture.
The lore of the gopota

Interviewer: Why do the gopota attack you?
Grisha: Well they think Vorkuta is just one big prison camp.
Yaroslav: They live by its lore [po poniatiiam] and there’s no way we fit their way of thinking.
Grisha: Yeah. It’s like, how can a normal, proper lad pierce his ears, or like shave something into his head... It’s just not what lads do basically.
St Petersburg: Victims of police brutality

• St Petersburg respondents mentioned attacks by *gopniki* less frequently.

• Punks in St Petersburg positioned themselves rather as the victims of aggression by the police or local security guards (at music venues)
Fighting extremism (?)

Our police are really brutal. We have a department for fighting extremism ... [and they] just fuck you over, trying to get any information from you, to get you to ‘cooperate’, so you turn in your friends. If you don’t give anyone up, you just get a fucking beating. All the pigs [police] have martial arts training ...They beat you in a way that leaves no traces. Everything hurts but you can’t go to A&E or photograph the beating, because you have no marks. (Tina)
The interactional nature of fighting

• An explanation of the differences between the two scenes lies less in the individual actors than in the interactions they have.

• While territorial gang culture no longer dominates the youth cultural scene in cosmopolitan St Petersburg, in Vorkuta the gopniki still ‘think of themselves as leaders...that everyone else is shit’ (Kirill). This creates many more random encounters in which violence is threatened or actual and to which punks have to respond.
Looking for a fight: not always victims

• In the Vorkuta context masculine pride and authority becomes attached to the ability to respond to aggression successfully.

• Punk violence is not always wholly reactive.

‘sometimes we seek out gopnki ourselves, because they get in our way’ (Kirill)
‘Communication interlocks’

- Youth cultural trajectories were also deeply interwoven: Savva as an ‘old gopnik’.
- Punks had also spent their early teenage years in territorially based groups with attendant norms of ‘prison camp’ loyalty, authority and masculinity.
- It is through what Fine and Kleinman call these ‘communication interlocks’ that common cultural practices, such as fighting, are developed.

‘We gathered and fought gang against gang, sometimes with fists, sometimes with iron bars, with stones. They were serious wars.... I think that in all cities people fought street against street. Maybe in Vorkuta it was more organised.’ (Savva)
Defending ‘our’ space: external ‘others’

• The proactive territorialism of punk violence is evident in punk aggression towards those who appeared to invade their space.
• In Vorkuta this was most frequently expressed in relation to emos who shared many public spaces with punks but whose younger age and predisposition to emotionality made them easy targets of aggression.
• Members of the band Marazm described the Biker club as having been ‘occupied’ by emos and the latter featured as figures of hate in numerous songs and artwork of the band.

Anti-emo humour in Marazm art work
Defending ‘our’ space: internal ‘others’

• On St Petersburg’s more diverse scene, territories were defended by factions within the punk scene.

• Tina complains that hardcore punks set themselves apart from other punks, thinking they were ‘cooler’.

• Hardcore respondents, meanwhile, describe how those drunken punks unskilled in hardcore dancing might be treated with aggression.
Here there are certain, specific dances like. But when some drunken shit appears and starts colliding with everyone. Well, I think it’s acceptable to get him in the head with your swinging arm. That’s really lush. So that the guy understands like, ‘Look mate, you can’t just come here and be in front of lads who have been going to concerts together their whole life, who dance together, who really know this stuff. And you are some drunken freak who is at this kind of gig virtually the first time. You haven’t a clue what mayhem you’re starting.’ (Pasha)
Hardcore ‘order’

Dancing crowd on the stage at a hardcore gig in Tantsy, St Petersburg, April 2010
The importance of context

- The issue here is not only one of hardcore versus other forms of punk, but also of context.
- Resistance to rules is highest where a demand for conformity to externally imposed order is greatest.
- In Vorkuta, where street life remains dominated by the lore of territorial gangs, punk becomes a strategy for differentiation from the ‘grey mass’ of gopniki with their ‘single, collective brain’ (Polad).
- At the same time, pressure to conform is aggressively pursued meaning that, punk or not, ‘if you want to live, you better know how to fight’ (Demid)
- Since Vorkuta punks had often ‘run with’ such gangs in their early teenage years, they can call on the shared cultural practices (fighting skills) and values (loyalty, not allowing oneself to be ‘walked over’) required to respond to frequent violence-threatening encounters
2. Fighting and ideology: solidarities and antagonisms

• Punk has been positioned ideologically in an ambiguous way. Punk in the UK was never incorporated fully into either left or right-wing ideological frameworks but remained a contested site of political engagement with punk gigs disrupted by competing political factions (see Worley 2012).

• Outside the UK, where punk often shared scenes with the skinhead movement or was embedded within wider anarchist, pacifist, feminist, vegan and/or animal rights movements, the attribution of a definitive ideological positioning to punk was even more difficult.
Ideology on Russian punk scenes

• The two punk scenes discussed here epitomise the unfixed relationship between punk and ideology.

• In St Petersburg, reference to ideology or politics was made primarily by younger hardcore respondents who also participated in anti-fascist direct action.

• In Vorkuta, the majority of younger punks on the scene shared friendship groups, values and attitudes with members of the (racist) skinhead movement in the city and some had participated in xenophobic violence.
St Petersburg: Trophy hunting

• In St Petersburg, hardcore respondents recounted participation in a trophy-hunting practice. This meant they identified individuals sporting ‘fascist’ symbols – boots, caps, scarves, badges – and relieved their wearers of them (Andrei).

• These incidents often involved violence and are remembered and recounted as deeply pleasurable (e.g. Pasha).

Hardcore, anti-fa respondent, St Petersburg, April 2010
Saturday night ‘fun’

‘I count myself as an anti-fascist ... I have been on actions and been arrested many times... But the stuff I did before – various actions, signing up, all kinds of meetings ... I don’t do that any more. I only go for a beer. Well, I do love to fight, I’m not denying it. It only needed a Saturday for us to end up in a scrap. It was fun.’ (Pasha)
The quiet face of anti-fascism

- Others sympathised with the anti-fascist cause but kept their politics to themselves for fear of the consequences.

- ‘Nationalism and xenophobia are stupid – that goes without saying. But if you make a stance against it then you are obliged to either beat others up or get it in the head yourself.’ (WhiteofFf)

- Punks and anti-fascists have to ‘live everyday as if it were their last’ (Tina).

WhiteofFf, St Petersburg, April 2010
Vorkuta: skinhead solidarities

• The anti-fascist scene in Vorkuta was virtually non-existent and, in sharp contrast to St Petersburg, the punk and skinhead scenes were closely intersected.

• Around 2002-03 gopnik gangs had fused with skinhead brigades. Thus many respondents had participated for a period of time in skinhead groups and activities and continued to share musical taste, spaces and friends with skinheads.

• "Almost every other person was a skin’ (Petya)
‘Subcultures’?

- This is a classic illustration of Fine and Kleinman’s recognition that members of ‘subcultures’ may participate in several groups simultaneously and maintain acquaintance relationships outside the major groups with which they communicate.

Punks and skinheads in slam together at Mazut gig, 17 October 2009
‘A punk with a skinhead world view’

• These ‘communication interlocks’ (Fine and Kleinman 1979: 7) are evident in widespread xenophobic attitudes among the younger generation of punks and song lyrics (e.g. Mezhdu Prochim’s ‘Zoo city’).

• Personal participation in violent skinhead actions was reported by a number of respondents including of Roman, a respondent with African heritage, who viewed ‘khachi’ as legitimate targets of violence if they ‘don’t behave themselves right’ (Roman).

• It is also evident in the self-identifications. Demid described himself as ‘a punk with a skinhead world view’ Sonya saw herself as a Nazi-punk
Discovering oneself: Nazi punks

‘I just didn’t know that such an expression as ‘Nazi punks’ existed. I was saying ‘I am a punk, but I am a Nazi’. That’s what I was saying but I didn’t know what it was called. Then I found out that I wasn’t the only one like that, a Nazi punk.’ (Sonya, 27 October 2009)
Punk and skin fighting: similarities

Masculine fighting identity is important to both punk and skinhead solidarity:

‘some of our views on life are similar... Freedom and a kind of struggle. Skinheads are fighting lads themselves.’ (Kirill)

• However, dissenting voices can also be heard within the Vorkuta scene (Artur, Kristina, Valera)

• The older generation of punks also remembered conflictual situations and fighting between skins and punks.
Punk and skin fighting: differences

- Fighting is not integral to punk scenes: Russian punks could claim to be punks if they did not fight.

- Punk fighting bends dominant codes of masculinity: while skinhead fighting was premised on ‘never backing down, no matter what the odds are’, punks can, and do, avoid fights.

- When fights do occur, they are often accidental or opportunistic, conducted in inebriated conditions, characterised by a spectacular display of heroic incompetence.

Demid, fresh from a fight whilst on tour in Inta
Punk fighting: Opportunism and chaos

• Narratives of punk fighting often suggest it is an unplanned but routine part of a ‘good night out’.

• For Demid (Vorkuta) fighting was his ‘hobby’: there was nothing better on a night out than the combination of good music, good beer and a good fight (Field diary).

• A striking characteristic of punk fights is that, after ‘beating the shit out of one another’, the protagonists ‘become best friends (Valera, Vorkuta)
Making friends...

Demid: We made friends because of a fight basically ... I had a fight with him [looks at Kirill] basically ... We were in the park. At the start, we were arguing about these white bootlaces, then about principles (poniatiiia), this and that, then we fought, and then, with another bloke, they gave me a bit of a kicking.

Stas: We went to get booze. When we got back, there was a fight kicking off...

Interviewer: And what was the thing with the white laces all about?

Demid: I had one green lace, the other was painted ...

Kirill: No – one was black and the other was white [...].

Demid: Basically we resolved the issue of not liking it, but then we had our own issue ...

Stas: I don’t know what started the fight.

Demid: He said ‘I don’t like you.’ I went, ‘So what? What d’you want to do about it?’ He goes, ‘I want to hit you.’ I go, ‘Okay’. He hits me. Then, it was, ‘I want another go’. ‘Okay, fine.’ And it kicked off ...
Tales of heroic incompetence

• This excerpt from a much longer story is included here as an indication of how fighting for punks constitutes a rich resource for ironic story-telling.

• These narratives play on the drunken state of the combatants, the hopeless prospects of victory (due to inferior numbers, physical strength or inebriation) and the frequent meaninglessness of the action (with whom or why a fight had occurred was often forgotten).

• Such tales of heroic incompetence are what distinguishes punk from other subcultural fighting.
Punk, fighting and masculinity

• Petya narrates how he had had to fight ‘eight khachi-gopniki’ at Vorkuta’s Black Moon club after treading on one of them accidentally on the dancefloor (Field diary).

• Kirill recounts how what should have been an easy put down of an emo resulted in having to take on car-load of local Vorkuta gangsters whom the emo called.

• In these stories, the failure of other punks to help out is part of the joke rather than a treacherous act. Members of Mezhdu Prochim laughed about how one of them had a kind of sixth sense that ‘always senses a drinking session, in which case he appears, or a fight, and then he immediately disappears …’ (Demid).

• This indicates that punk masculinities are not secured necessarily through street positioning as ‘fighters’.

• Even Kostya and Kirill (Vorkuta), both of whom participated in fights relatively frequently, said it was often wiser to try to talk one’s way out of situations.
Punk, fighting and femininity

• Punk femininities also did not necessarily exclude fighting.
• One female punk on the St Petersburg scene was admired for her ability ‘to break men’ including ‘boneheads’ (Pasha).
• Tina also got a buzz from the fights in which her group of friends participated and was an active participant in hardcore dance practices that often left dancers battered and bruised (Field diary, St Petersburg).
• Sonya’s narrative of her drunken fighting experience at the Evropa club in Vorkuta, moreover, displays similar style and content to the tales of heroic incompetence recounted by male punks.
‘You can’t get by’ without being able to fight

Sonya: They apparently had decided it was their club, their territory and they would introduce their rules. But I told them to fuck off ... At the beginning we jostled a bit, then basically we went out to ‘talk’ [...]

Interviewer: You went out to fight?

Sonya: Sometimes you have to. And the fortified wine got broken...by then I was already quite drunk.... I drank more beer, drank just about anything. Then, when I was already pretty out of it, this gopnik started having a go at me. I was already mad because... at any concert, if I feel like climbing onto the stage... I climb onto the stage and I don’t see why anybody should stop me.... But here this great brute starts pushing me off the stage ... I was so mad with him. And every time I climbed up, he pushed me off again ... I was having great fun, I was so mad. And then again some gopnik started giving me grief and I smashed the fortified wine against his head. I was already out of it. And then a third time, I failed to get the fortified wine through. So I drank it in one – I was completely wasted by then. I got this idea about getting in from the inside, where the musicians hang out. I haven’t a clue how I got there. But I got to the stage and fell asleep [laughs]

Interviewer: So do you often get involved in scuffles, in fights?

Sonya: Not often but it happens.

Interviewer: And you can stand up for yourself?

Sonya: Of course. I learned to do that quite a long time ago. Because you can’t get by without being able to here.
Conclusion (1)

• Punk fighting has commonalities with that found in other subcultures (skinheads, football fans) in terms of its audience oriented and rule-governed character.

• The ritualised nature of punk violence (generating loyalty and authority) is apparent in traditional clashes with ‘subcultural’ or ideological ‘others’: gopniki and emos in Vorkuta; ‘boneheads’ and ‘drunk punks’ in St Petersburg.

• But, most violence and fighting on punk scenes is opportunistic, chaotic and incompetent. This is what makes punk fighting distinctive.
Conclusion (2)

• Punk fighting may be ‘audience-oriented’ but functions less as a mechanism of initiation or ritual than as a source of material for ironic reflection and story-telling.

• Comparison between the two scenes demonstrates the importance of socio-cultural context and inter-group communication in shaping cultural practices.

• The continued significance of territorially-organised youth groups (*gopniki*) in Vorkuta and the fusion of these groups with (racist) skinhead culture, explains the highly intersected nature of punk and racist skinhead scenes and the diffusion of communicative practices (including xenophobic and racist talk) and everyday behaviours and values (such as fighting and the valorisation of ‘standing up for oneself’) that are absent from the St Petersburg punk scene.

• Punk lives are deeply embedded in everyday lives and, in Vorkuta, punk or not, if you want to live, you better know how to fight.