

Murder for Hire as a Manifestation of Organized Crime

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The number of murders for hire is on the rise in Russia, presenting a new challenge for Russian law enforcement agencies. Murders for hire are defined as a “service” of economic activity whereby business competitors are intimidated or killed as a means of resolving problems. Also known as contract killings, these murders are committed for personal and political reasons. Until recently, murder for hire was mentioned neither in the Russian media nor in the legal literature and legislation. The new criminal code of the Russian Federation (paragraph 3, article 105) acknowledges the deliberate causing of a person’s death by hiring a murderer.

Murder for hire, as a subcategory of contract killings, is usually committed by professional “hit men” for monetary compensation. Some criminal organizations specialize in this line of work; orders for murder can be filled by a staff of professional killers. The criminologists who study the phenomenon of contract killings believe that conditions have emerged in the Russian Federation conducive to the establishment of large criminal organizations similar to Murder Incorporated of the 1930s in the United States, an organization that was responsible for about 1,000 contract killings in its ten-year existence.

What is striking to the man on the street is their cruelty and scale, and the professionalism with which contract killings are now carried out. One is struck by the availability of information on the locations of the murders, the names of the victims, and the amount of the remuneration received by the murderers. However, it is rare for the name of the person who ordered the killing to be publicized.

The number of such crimes is growing, and specialists believe them to be linked to organized crime rather than to any other form of criminal activity. Organized crime manifests itself in those cases when an organization is necessary to provide leadership, subordination, distribution of roles, and deployment of resources. In such cases, criminal operations turn into a self-sustaining activity. Organized crime is highly professionalized. The preparations for operations are

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extensive, and the command and control mechanism is extremely tight and secure. Murders are handled in such a professional manner that the only chance of solving them is when they are committed by dilettantes or when powerful political figures take an interest in them.

As is widely known, the laws of the market apply to organized crime. Demand for commodities and services generates supply. In the criminal world, there is a demand for illegal profits, removal of competition, monopolies on certain types of entrepreneurship, and so on. In response to these demands of the criminal market, a supply of criminal services has emerged and is flourishing.

The Origins and Characteristics of Murders for Hire

Contract killings appeared in Russia in the early 1990s as the transition from a command to a market economy got under way with voucher privatization of state property. A spate of contract killings corresponded with monetary privatization, not only in the criminal underworld, but also among legitimate entrepreneurs. The emergence of the market economy has been accompanied by a new form of murder—murder as a means of resolving commercial disagreements. This category also includes murder as a result of dividing profits from commercial ventures; murder of a competitor or of an unyielding customer obstructing commercial activity; murder when one of the parties breaks an agreement, as a consequence of fighting for spheres of influence among criminal gangs, and as revenge for the murder of a member of a criminal gang.

From the point of view of a criminologist, it is extremely interesting to consider the supply and demand mechanism in contract killings. Because such crimes are seldom solved and the perpetrators remain unknown, it is important to reconstruct the sequence and interplay of forces in those cases that have been solved by law enforcement agencies in the Maritime Province. An examination of the 1996–97 criminal investigations of this region reveals that in the category of contract killings, two cases were filed with the court, four were investigated by law enforcement agencies, and one was dismissed. According to the Procuracy of the Maritime Province, not one murder for hire was committed in 1997. However, criminologists and practitioners are concerned by the drastic increase in the number of murders linked to power and influence struggles, contracts, debts, and other issues. Why is it that the number of contract killings is growing, but the official figures remain modest? One of the explanations is that murderers for hire are constantly changing their status and location. A well-known criminal gang in the Maritime Province—“Brothers Larionov”—has created a combat unit specializing in the physical elimination of their enemies.

Professional murderers can be defined as persons for whom contract murder is the main source of income and who have special training and experience with firearms. Most gained their combat and firearm experience during warfare in Afghanistan, Nagorno-Karabakh, Chechnya, Abkhazia, Tajikistan, and other “hot spots” of Russia and the newly independent states. Others gained their expertise while employed in law enforcement agencies or learned how to use firearms as sportsmen. Still others are criminals who honed their marksmanship “on the

job” while committing a variety of crimes. These professional killers share a psychological readiness to deprive another person of his or her life. But what is it that makes them become professional killers? How does murder become merely a “job”? How different are these professional killers from serial killers?

It is difficult to draw a psychological profile of a professional killer because, as mentioned above, so few of their murders are solved and therefore open to examination. The majority of these cases are called “dark,” meaning that there is a slim chance that they will be solved in the near future. Access to them is further limited by the criminal procedural code, the confidentiality of investigation, and the prerogatives of the investigating officer. Despite these limitations, the law enforcement agencies’ data reveal the following contract killings:¹

- Location of crime: 17 percent, home; 14 percent, office; 14 percent, automobile; 8.6 percent, street/stairway
- Time of Crime: Moscow: 25 percent in the morning, 22 percent in the evening; Maritime Province: 30 percent between 10 p.m. and 12 p.m.
- Of all victims, 44 percent are shot in the head with a firearm
- Type of Firearm: pistol: Far East, 64.7 percent; Moscow, 77.9 percent; machine-gun: Far East, 23.5 percent; Moscow, 17.7 percent; hunter’s rifle/self-made firearm: 11.8 percent

In all cases considered, a firearm was not left at the scene of the crime, but in almost all cases the corpses were. Other persons were often among the victims: acquaintances, 14.6 percent; relatives, 5.8 percent; and neighbors, 2.9 percent. As for the age of the victims, 67.7 percent were between thirty and forty-nine years old; 26.5 percent were under thirty, one was a minor, and one was over fifty. The occupation of the victims tends to be business, banking, or crime boss.

Crime in Maritime Province (Primorskii Krai)

The Maritime Province in the Russian Far East is experiencing a criminal war over the redivision of power and property.² The chief of the Maritime police, General Vasiliyev, named six presumed contract murders committed in 1997 at a recent press conference. The victims included criminal bosses Anatolyi “Koval” Kovalyev and Mikhail “Mikho” Osipov; businessmen Sadykh Kafarov, Yuri Martkovskii, and Vladimir Dmitriyev; and entrepreneurs Galina and Vladimir Kucheriavenko. The latter two were subjected to cruel torture and buried alive.

In February 1998, there were a record number of five contract killings. The victims included the well-known criminal boss Vrekh Babakekhyan; businessmen Maxim Ostroukhov and Shukhrat Madalimov; and the CEO of Tor, Mikhail Kim. Spring 1998 brought little relief from the criminal wars. In April, the CEO of Dalintourist, Yuri Potapov, a lawyer named Samikhova who had been close to Larionov, and the director of Runo, Mikhail Rud’, were all killed. Also in April, the corpse of Artur Altnov was discovered. According to some documents, Altnov was a well-known professional killer who had traveled from St. Petersburg to Vladivostok with two associates to carry out a contract murder. Instead, he himself was killed.

Two important murders took place on May Day 1998, a national holiday in Russia. A businessman and the criminal leader Igor "Karp" Karpov were shot in the center of town. Karp was one of the protégés of the well-known criminal boss Sergey Baulo, who was killed in 1995. In the city of Nakhodka, businessman Sergey "Sayid" Davydenko was felled by machine-gun fire.

The motive for most contract killings, according to the research, appears to be the failure of business partners to meet their financial obligations. There was also a case in which a victim of extortion was murdered for testifying against the extortionist. A number of contract killings occurred in connection with a battle for shares of a large fishing company, Primorybbprom. In October 1995, an unknown criminal blew up a device that fatally wounded the CEO of Primorybbprom, A. S. Zakharenko. In January 1996, gunmen opened fire on a Volga automobile carrying the chairman of the board of directors, O. P. Tan, and his bodyguards. Tan survived, but his bodyguards did not. The murder of Zakharenko and the assassination attempt on Tan were part of power struggles between rival groups in one of the largest fishing industries. Intriguing in this case is that the officers of the military counterintelligence of the Pacific fleet and the internal troops of the Ministry of Internal Affairs were involved. The case against the accused murderers and their accomplices was brought to court in April 1998. Alexander Brekhov, one of the accused, made a sensational statement that turned into a major political scandal. He claimed that the murder of Zakharenko was organized, or at the very least sanctioned, by the governor of the Maritime Province, Yevgeny Nazdratenko.

According to our sources, a total of twenty-one contract murders were committed in 1997, of which only five were solved. All told, there were 544 murders of which 120 remain unsolved. During the first four months of 1998, eleven contract killings occurred, 80 percent of them in Vladivostok, where economic, financial, banking, and insurance interests are located. The peaks of criminal activity indeed tend to correspond with investment booms, privatization of property, elections of representatives to federal, regional, and local government, and changes of leadership in commercial companies.

The elections to the Maritime Province Duma in December 1997 occurred in a shadow of criminal scandal. Duma candidate Yakimchuk announced at a press conference on 4 December that he had been invited to the office of the Federal Security Service, where he was warned that an attempt on his life might be made. The person who ostensibly ordered the assassination was the director of the Maritime Province administrative department. He was reported to have entered into an agreement with a criminal group to resolve his financial disputes with Yakimchuk.

The nature of murder for hire as a social phenomenon is not fully understood. The official criminal statistics do not treat contract killings as a separate category of criminal activity. Methods for solving such murder cases are underdeveloped; indeed, only 10 percent of contract murders are solved because of a severe shortage of empirical data.

Contract murders are likely to continue as long as there is a demand for them, economically, psychologically, and socially. Therefore, we must understand this form of crime more fully and develop methods of preventing and combating it.

