For this Sunday, May 12, 2019, the Today's Issues group will discuss two essays from the May 9 issue of The New York Review of Books

Page 22, Sean Wilentz, "How Our Politics Broke" about political polarization in this country

Page 48, Alex Abramovich, "Dons of the Gulag," about Russia's super-Mafia.

The group meets in the parlor of the Religious Education building next to the church. Please do the readings and join our lively discussion.

Copies of the essays are attached:

How Our Politics Broke
Sean Wilentz MAY 9, 2019 ISSUE
If We Can Keep It: How the Republic Collapsed and How It Might Be Saved
by Michael Tomasky
Liveright, 273 pp., $27.95
Newt Gingrich, Mitch McConnell, and Donald Trump
In his appearance before the House Oversight Committee in late February, President Trump's former fixer Michael Cohen saved his most disturbing words for his concluding statement, when he said he fears that if Trump loses the 2020 election, "there will never be a peaceful transition of power." Cohen did not elaborate, and the committee members had no opportunity to pose follow-up questions. But imagine, for example, a catastrophic terrorist attack that prompted Trump to declare a national emergency with the support of congressional Republicans, the conservative majority on the Supreme Court, and Fox News, Breitbart, and countless websites. In such circumstances Cohen's scenario is not utterly inconceivable.

In If We Can Keep It, Michael Tomasky raises no alarms about the prospects of a Trumpian coup, but like Cohen he believes that the republic is deeply imperiled. For Tomasky, though, Trump and his supporters are not the sole or even the biggest threat. "Chapter for chapter," he writes, "most of this book could have appeared just as it now stands no matter who became president." He is more troubled by the partisan polarization and consequent dysfunction that made Trump's presidency possible.

In accounting for the dysfunction, Tomasky sometimes offers a version of today's blander political punditry, which holds that we have become polarized because the middle has fallen out of American politics. His formulation speaks of the decline of what he calls "intraparty polarization"—that is, of the strong differences inside the major parties that have traditionally tempered polarization between the parties. As both parties have become more ideologically homogenous, he observes, opportunities for cross-party alliances have vanished; "now," he writes, "we have party tribalism." Caught up in that tribal warfare, "more and more Americans"—those whom pundits are constantly pointing to as the missing middle—"are turned

off by parties." Meanwhile, in a vicious spiral, both sides become ever more fervent in demonizing their adversaries.

One weakness of this kind of formulation is that it substitutes a description of current divisions for an analysis of how they came about. To assert that parties are more polarized today because they are no longer the broad coalitions they once were is an improvement over simply saying that the center has disappeared, and it adds useful historical insight, but it still comes very close to being tautological. By implication, it also holds Democrats as well as Republicans responsible for the collapse of political cooperation, if not necessarily to the same degree. The conventions of faux objectivity demand finding fault with both sides for today's polarization, if only to avoid being dismissed as partisan, and when Tomasky pays lip service to those conventions, even faintly, it weakens his analysis. At his strongest, though, he forthrightly indicts the Republican Party as the chief malefactor in creating and exploiting the country's divisions.

Numerous previous commentators, from divergent political positions, have contributed to the latter line of argument, in what has emerged as a coherent and persuasive interpretation of the politics of the last quarter-century. Much of Tomasky's analysis of specific features of the Republicans' descent into destructiveness—the capture of the party by its far right, the rise of Fox News and the rest of the right-wing media, and the expansion of "dark money" politics following the Citizens United decision in 2010—complements the writings of Thomas E. Mann and Norman J. Ornstein, E.J. Dionne, and Jane Mayer, among others. The best parts of If We Can Keep It offer a fresh and original version of the larger history their studies relate, informed by the firsthand knowledge of a veteran Washington reporter.

In the late 1960s and 1970s, according to this interpretation, the combined effects of the civil rights movement, American involvement in Vietnam, and the Watergate scandals shattered the national party alignments of the New Deal era that had culminated in Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society. Conservatives aligned with the Goldwater wing of the GOP mobilized behind Ronald Reagan in 1980 to seize control of the party. By the end of the decade, what had once appeared to be a liberal national consensus on race, gender, and economics—dedicated to ending egregious bigotry and inequity—had collapsed; consensus over liberalized immigration laws, which persisted under Reagan, would disappear soon after. Fed by rising economic inequality and amplified by a relentless celebration of wealth in the mass media, a fractured, cynical, winner-take-all culture destroyed an older sense of social solidarity and common purpose.

Then, in the 1990s, the center of the GOP shifted sharply, moving even further to the right. After Reagan, George H.W. Bush could not sustain the high-wire act of restoring a "kinder, gentler" politics while also satisfying Republican right-wingers. The Connecticut Yankee had tried to transform himself into a Texas conservative, but his change of identity was always unconvincing. Running for the presidential nomination against Reagan in 1980, he openly dismissed "voodoo economics." But to win over the GOP right in 1988 he was compelled to declare, "Read my lips—no new taxes." When he broke his promise, his brief interregnum

brutally ended with the rise of the slash-and-burn politics of a younger generation of conservatives led by Newt Gingrich. The impeachment of Bill Clinton in 1998, capping relentless right-wing efforts to disgrace and topple him, proved to be just a preview of the hyperpolarized politics to come.

In the next great polarizing fight, the Bush/Gore election of 2000, the conservative majority on the Supreme Court delivered the presidency to the Republican candidate based on a reading of the Constitution that was, one of the concurring justices, Antonin Scalia, later privately mocked, "as they say in Brooklyn, a piece of shit." Then came the shock of the terrorist attacks of September 11. The Democrats foundered until 2006 when, with the George W. Bush administration's Iraq War increasingly unpopular, they regained the House majority. Two years later they elected Barack Obama, who tried and failed to recreate a spirit of American comity. As soon as Obama took office, Senator Mitch McConnell, the Republican leader, told his caucus, "The single most important thing we want to achieve is for President Obama to be a one-term president." McConnell's nihilism extended to denying even a hearing to Obama's moderate choice for the Supreme Court, Merrick Garland.

The GOP, meanwhile—fed from the coffers of billionaire reactionaries and their political foundations, with right-wing propaganda blaring around the clock from Fox News and talk radio—became less a normal American political party and more a movement of passionate ideologues, pushed on by a succession of Tea Party and Freedom Caucus zealots who made Gingrich appear almost a moderate. Finally, in 2016, Donald Trump calculated how to capture the Republican rank and file, ridiculing the remnants of squishy, "low-energy" Republican moderation (personified by Jeb Bush) and focusing rage against "politically correct" liberal elites, "globalists" like George Soros, and the dark menace of black, Latino, and immigrant hordes.

Tomasky tells this story very well, but with one major difference: unlike most commentators, he dates the origins of the current polarization to long before the 1990s or the 1960s, before even the formation of the Republican Party in 1854, and practically to the nation's founding. Much of what we take to be convulsions peculiar to our own time are, he asserts, endemic to our politics. Intense partisan polarization is nothing new; it has been our state since the early nineteenth century, when political parties first appeared. To be sure, a period of relative consensus between the parties existed from, roughly, 1945 to 1980, which for many pundits has become the baseline of normal political times. Tomasky insists, though, that these were anomalous decades whose happy legacy badly distorts perceptions of the present as well as the past.

If We Can Keep It aims to clarify the current ferocity by examining earlier phases of profound partisan divisiveness, beginning in the 1790s. It then tries to account for the rise and fall of the singular consensus that emerged after the Great Depression and World War II and died after the Vietnam War and Watergate. It concludes with a review of what distinguishes our current distempers from the rest of American political history, followed by some suggestions about how to mitigate them.

Readers familiar with the gravity of Tomasky's political reporting in The New York Review and elsewhere will find at least one small surprise in the book. Hoping to connect with a wide general readership—"the schoolteacher in Akron, the bank vice president in Chattanooga"—he at times adopts, not always successfully, a brisk, even light-hearted style, peppered with offhand references to pop culture and the here-and-now, presumably to keep from sounding too solemn. The nativist Know-Nothings of the 1850s, for example, remind him of Sergeant Schultz from Hogan's Heroes, who also said he knew nothing. After a while, this jokiness begins to distract. Mostly, though, Tomasky writes seriously, with his usual blend of precise detail and analytic clarity, leavened with an undogmatic, self-critical liberalism. His historical perspective, if not always his conclusions, helps make sense of our situation today.

Because at least some of the current mess derives from the undemocratic apportionment of the US Senate—in which Wyoming, with just over half a million people, and California, with 40 million, each have two seats—and the hyperpartisan gerrymandering of House districts, Tomasky devotes his first chapter to the haphazard history of those legislative bodies, starting with their creation at the Constitutional Convention in 1787. He takes obvious delight in showing how contingent, arbitrary, and often deeply undemocratic congressional representation has been over the centuries; and he returns to these matters in his concluding chapter, which proposes various structural reforms. The core of his historical exposition, though, lies in his second chapter's discussion of the long history of partisan polarization.

Tomasky offers a capsule history of the evolution of the nation's bitterly divided party systems: the Jeffersonians' successful challenge to the Federalists' "reign of witches" in 1800; Martin Van Buren's invention of the thoroughly professional Jacksonian Democratic Party in the 1820s; the rise of the Republican Party in the 1850s; and finally the emergence of the Democrats' New Deal coalition in 1932. At any point along the way, he reminds us, partisan combat could be just as ferocious and tribalistic as anything we've seen over the last twenty-five years. Federalists charged that the Jeffersonians intended to launch a bloody reign of terror; Andrew Jackson's opponents called him a murderer, a tyrant, and a bigamist to boot. Congressman Preston Brooks bludgeoned Senator Charles Sumner nearly to death on the floor of the Senate in 1856 in retaliation for a confrontational antislavery speech.

Tomasky emphasizes, however, a constant and crucial mitigating factor: normally, even the nastiest partisan fighting was tempered by fractious disputes within the parties, over issues ranging from the expansion of slavery to civil service reform to the prohibition of alcohol. "The parties were constantly adapting in order to put winning coalitions together," he observes, and to preserve those coalitions, party leaders had to spend nearly as much energy on muffling internal dissent as on fighting the other side. Unlike European-style parties tightly united by ideology, the typical American party was "a huge and ideologically unwieldly beast, at war with itself." Those divisions acted as a kind of balance wheel, keeping the warfare between the parties themselves from posing a threat to the republic.

While Tomasky is strong on major patterns and periods, his command of some of the historical details is shaky. Van Buren, for example, was certainly the mastermind behind the creation of the Democratic Party, until, as Tomasky notes, he opportunistically bolted to run for the presidency on the antislavery Free Soil ticket in 1848, but he never became an antislavery stalwart. The Republicans did indeed become the party of Wall Street in 1872, but not because the Radical Republicans defected to ally with anti-Reconstruction Democrats in 1872; the elitist so-called Liberal Republicans were the defectors. As Tomasky concedes, meanwhile, his account of offsetting intra- and interparty rifts cannot explain the politics of the 1850s, when the ideological battles inside the major parties, far from tempering polarization, led to the capture of the Democratic Party by its ultra–southern rights wing, which led to secession and civil war.

Still, his historical narrative provides important clues about the present, when the balance wheel of our party politics appears to be broken. What, though, about the decades after 1945, the shining bipartisan moment that Tomasky calls America's "age of consensus"? How and why did the system for a time work so well? Here, interestingly, he shifts his emphasis from political dynamics to cultural forces, as shaped by the national experience of the Great Depression and World War II. It is not that passionate partisanship declined after the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt. (Tomasky quotes one typical pro-business reactionary thundering over the New Deal: "The dragon teeth of class warfare are being sown with a vengeance.") But the shock of prolonged mass unemployment, he says, followed by the sorrows and sacrifices of wartime, united Americans as never before in a spirit of common purpose. "While politics and partisanship continued on Capitol Hill," he writes, "the watchword in the culture at large was 'consensus.'" It would remain that way through the prosperous 1950s into the 1960s, as the cold war fostered a collective commitment to democratic ideals and national accord.

All this patriotic pulling together, Tomasky argues, created a pervasive civic faith that guided the political leaders of the postwar era, especially in Congress, instilling in them "a sense of duty and responsibility, a profound respect for the institution they served, and an understanding that they were all there to do the job of finding a way to work through their disagreements to make the country a better place." Of course, he allows, it was this noble cohort of congressmen that embroiled us in the Vietnam disaster; and there were the southern racists who tried to kill civil rights legislation. But corny as it might sound, "legislators of this time really did have a sense of a national interest." As a result, polarization sharply abated, to the point where a monumental measure like the 1964 Civil Rights Act could win huge majorities from both parties in both houses of Congress.

There is some merit in this depiction, if only in recalling how Americans liked to think of themselves in the post–World War II era. These years produced influential historical writing by, among others, Louis Hartz and Richard Hofstadter that interpreted the American experience as defined more by consensus than conflict. Still, Tomasky's heartwarming paean badly exaggerates the unity of the postwar years.

As he knows, the Republican right would never be party to any consensus about the larger national interest. Senator Robert Taft and his fellow small-government, isolationist conservatives tried their best to undermine one of the bulwarks of social accord, organized labor (by passing, for example, the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act), and they opposed US involvement in NATO and other institutions of international collective security. Republican conservatives were more than happy to support the political thuggery of Senator Joseph McCarthy as a weapon against the Democrats, until his rampaging threatened to disgrace the entire party. When General Douglas MacArthur faced off against Harry Truman over the conduct of the Korean War, he cast the president as a virtual traitor. Although the 1950s Republican right wing never captured the White House or a majority in either house of Congress, it certainly shook American culture as well as American politics.

Tomasky's age of consensus was more precisely, as he himself specifies, an age of liberal consensus, when for most Americans the benefits of a large and powerful federal government were taken for granted, and the majority in both parties, rank and file as well as leadership, accepted the basic premises of the New Deal. The liberal ascendancy in turn owed much to the vagaries of party alliances. The New Deal would have been impossible had Franklin Roosevelt failed to secure the Democratic electoral coalition of northern liberals and southern segregationists. FDR's crushing political success in turn encouraged shifts inside the Republican Party, as liberal voices allied with the party's eastern wing like Wendell Willkie and Dwight D. Eisenhower gained ascendency over small-government conservatives and pro-business reactionaries. This odd convergence, unprecedented in our history, of progressive northerners, Jim Crow southerners, and liberal Republicans, all more or less friendly to the New Deal, sustained the longest liberal epoch in American history, which also happened to be the most auspicious period of political comity. It would last only as long as national politics remained sealed off from rising agitation over civil rights and racial justice.

Once he gets to the 1960s, Tomasky returns for the most part to politics and offers a crisp account of the Republican-driven destruction of normal partisan oppositions. Unfortunately, when he moves on to discuss what this history can teach us, he reverts to a variation of the conventional wisdom about the missing middle. Today's polarization, he asserts, is due chiefly to a simple historical fact: once the parties jettisoned their respective moderate elements after 1980, "the middle disappeared." We are no more polarized than most previous generations of Americans have been, but we have turned that polarization into something dangerously abnormal by forgetting the imperative of sustaining party coalitions. Tomasky recalls how in 1944 FDR mused to an adviser about ridding the Democratic Party of its southern reactionaries, attracting liberal Republicans to replace them, and leaving the remaining conservatives to fend for themselves. "We ought to have two real parties," Roosevelt remarked, "one liberal, and one conservative." Seventy-five years later, it looks, disastrously, as if FDR's wish has come true.

How, on this view, might that disaster be contained and reversed? Ending the Trump presidency would be, by Tomasky's logic, necessary but not sufficient, and in his final chapter, he suggests fourteen broad reforms to restore balance to our polarized politics. Some of these, like ending

partisan gerrymandering of the House and eliminating the Senate filibuster, are familiar but eminently sensible and even practicable. Others are either unlikely or, as Tomasky himself recognizes, potentially harmful. Abolishing the Electoral College, for example, would end the undemocratic practice of declaring the loser of the popular vote the winner of the presidency, which has thwarted the electorate's will twice in the twenty-first century. But apart from the daunting odds, given current political realities, against ratifying the required constitutional amendment, direct popular election of the president would also probably destroy the tattered parties that Tomasky would like to strengthen, as it would invite any number of egotistical billionaires to bypass the party primaries in which they have a contested path to the nomination and just try their luck in the general election—a recipe for chaos.

More puzzling, yet also telling, is Tomasky's main proposal—he calls it "the most important project in American politics"—which is to revive moderate Republicanism. He acknowledges that liberal Republicanism, of the kind once upheld by Senators Jacob Javits of New York or Lowell Weicker of Connecticut, is probably extinct. But he holds out hope that there are still some conservative Republicans "who harbor a few moderate instincts." Find a group of likeminded billionaires to fund a Club for Growth of the center, to recruit and run candidates to challenge the party's hard right, and the party might be made normal once more—and the republic might be saved.

The suggestion is in line with Tomasky's restatement of the idea of the missing middle—and it flies in the face of the rest of his book. If the GOP truly became the movement party he claims it did, beginning with Gingrich, there hasn't been room for that kind of reasonable, even cautiously independent conservative for a very long time. Trump has drastically worsened the situation.

Reviving moderate Republicanism sounds like a doomed Tinker Bell project, where all the wishful prayers and applause one can muster can't keep the light from dying. To think otherwise is to misread the strange creature the Republican Party has become: a minority party that survives and thrives on dark money and voter suppression, and whose leaders—none more brazenly than Mitch McConnell—habitually compromise the integrity of the institutions they serve in order to advance an extremist agenda and insulate their president from the Constitution's checks and balances.

The stronger parts of Tomasky's analysis, on shifting party coalitions, offer a sounder way to think historically about what it will take to return our politics to normal. The Democratic Party certainly became a more liberal and less ideologically diverse party after its southern segregationist wing defected to the Republicans in the 1960s and 1970s, but who can seriously say this was a terrible thing for the Democrats? It's not as if the party also repudiated the moderating force of the southern center-left; indeed, it elected southern Democrats to the presidency in 1976, 1992, and 1996, and in 2000 it nearly elected another.

Although today's pundits have been hyping a supposed Democratic swerve to the left, many more moderate Democrats were elected to Congress in the 2018 blue wave than self-styled

progressives. Any party that embraces Joe Manchin, Conor Lamb, Cory Booker, Amy Klobuchar, Andrew Cuomo, Doug Jones, Hillary Clinton, Kamala Harris, J.B. Pritzker, and Joe Biden as well as Elizabeth Warren and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is a reasonable approximation of what Tomasky calls a normal political party. The real crisis in our politics is not that the middle has disappeared from our major parties; rather, one party remained a coalition while the other long ago became a reactionary movement, backed by a minority of Americans and dedicated to plutocracy and racial demagogy, that has imposed its will on the nation. The closest parallel to it in our history came in the 1850s, when a tiny minority of militant Southern slaveholders, in firm control of the Democratic Party, threatened to wreck the country unless they got their way.

In confronting the actual polarization of our politics, it would also help to pay closer attention to where we stand in history. FDR's musings on creating a liberal and a conservative party can be read as a caution against disregarding the moderating blessings of broad coalitions. Tomasky returns to them toward the end of his book, and momentarily wonders whether sharply defined parties make more sense than the traditional middle, before deciding that today's sharp definitions have become poisonous.

But FDR made those remarks in 1944, after the liberal consensus born of the New Deal and World War II was about to become the dominant force in American politics. Eight years earlier, campaigning for his second term, when the balance of forces was completely different and when, more like today, there was no middle ground, FDR famously rose to the challenge of a fervid Republican right wing not unlike our own. "I should like to have it said of my first administration that in it the forces of selfishness and of lust for power met their match," he told the crowd at Madison Square Garden in October 1936. "I should like to have it said of my second administration that in it these forces met their master." That's the spirit.

Dons of the Gulag
Alex Abramovich MAY 9, 2019 ISSUE
The Vory: Russia's Super Mafia
by Mark Galeotti
Yale University Press, 326 pp., $28.00
A man with tattoos bathing in the Irtysh River
Alexander Aksakov/Getty Images
A man with tattoos indicating that he is affiliated with organized crime, Tobolsk, Siberia, January 2016; he is bathing in the waters of the Irtysh River to wash away his sins on Epiphany
Vor is the Russian word for "thief," but in Russia, the vory, or vory v zakone ("thieves in the code"), were more than thieves. They were something like made men, or even mafia dons—initiates into the vorovskoi mir (the "thieves' world"), which was distinct from Russia's much larger blatnoy ("criminal") world and governed by its own set of unwritten, inflexible rules. The vory were creatures of the Gulag—imprisonment being a requirement for inclusion—and rare creatures at that. In the West, you caught glimpses of them in Alexander Solzhenitsyn's

Gulag Archipelago and in Eugenia Ginsburg's memoirs; in his Kolyma Tales, Varlam Shalamov discussed them at length.

In the Soviet Union, where these works were banned, the vor's slang and stories informed the blatnye songs Vladimir Vysotsky was playing in the early 1960s. But by and large, the vory themselves had died out by then. Their short, brutal history is at the center of a recent study by Mark Galeotti, a well-known scholar, security consultant, and sometime member of the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office. But Galeotti's subtitle, "Russia's Super Mafia," speaks more to their legacy. What does "lawlessness" mean, he seems to be asking, in a place where the rule of law has become, or always has been, a fiction?

There were bandits in tsarist times, too, of course. Galeotti quotes Nicholas I, who is supposed to have told his ten-year-old son, "I believe you and I are the only people in Russia who don't steal." Prerevolutionary Russia was underpoliced, and its policemen and bureaucrats were underpaid, to the extent that bribery was factored into their salaries. In the countryside, lynch law prevailed. "Was this a crime," Galeotti writes,

or was it the commune policing itself? Needless to say, the state resented and feared the notion of peasants taking the law into their own hands, but there was very little it could do, given the strength of the peasants' own moral code and the practical difficulties of mounting day-to-day policing of such a huge country.

Aside from small, localized guilds made up of thieves or beggars, Russian organized crime did not exist, in a meaningful sense, until industrialization and the concurrent rise of inner-city slums. These were the "pits" that the Russians called yamas: St. Petersburg's Hay Market Square, which Dostoevsky wrote about in Crime and Punishment; Odessa's Moldovanka, where Isaac Babel's fictional gangster Benya Krik ruled over an underworld that Babel had drawn from life.

The revolution that Babel lived through did not sweep this old world away. "The Russian Civil War of 1918–22 was the formative moment for the Bolsheviks and in many ways their abiding tragedy," Galeotti writes.

Their reformist impulses and idealism were sacrificed in the name of survival, and, while the Reds won the war, they lost their soul. What was left was a brutal, disciplined and militarised regime, in which the cynical and the ruthless would rise fast and far…. In 1922, the ispolkom or executive committee running the southern Russian village of Novoleushkovskaya was reportedly run by one Ubykon, an infamous horse thief of pre-revolutionary times, who had been imprisoned for raping his twelve-year-old sister.

The revolution itself had been financed by criminal activities. Stalin, for instance, had been robbing banks, running protection rackets, counterfeiting, and kidnapping for ransom for the better part of a decade by the time his party took over the Duma. Cautiously, Galeotti endorses

a claim by the Georgian crime lord Otari Kvantrishvili, who was gunned down outside a Moscow bathhouse in 1994, that it was not himself but “Vladimir Ilyich Lenin who was the real organiser of the mafia and who set up the criminal state.”

Under Lenin, political prisoners in the Solovki Special Camp, in Russia’s Far North, were turned into slaves—forced to work for their own upkeep, as well as for the good of the state. But when common criminals were funneled into the camps, a small subset of thieves refused to perform manual labor. They were the first vory v zakone, and as the Gulag spread across Russia and became, in Solzhenitsyn’s elegant formulation, “a continent—an almost invisible, almost imperceptible country,” they formed Russia’s first nationwide criminal network.

The vor’s code was strict: in the Gulag, thieves maimed themselves to avoid work; outside the Gulag, a vor was expected to get by on stealing and gambling alone. Thieves had to sever whatever ties they had had with the state, society, and their own families. Collaborating—even fraternizing—with the authorities was unthinkable. Vory could not serve in the army, pay taxes, or involve themselves in political activities. They had to pay into their own common fund (their obshchak), but in theory, they were not covetous—owning too much of anything, or anything at all, was just one more way of tying oneself to the state—nor were they violent, unless violence was absolutely necessary. Killing lay outside the code (a rule that may have been honored more in the breach). For all the stories that came to surround them, most of the vory were simple pickpockets. And yet, as their code and their legend spread throughout the camps, they became de facto rulers—the dons of the Gulag.1

The slang that the vory employed was almost a language of its own. Bodyguards were byki, or “bulls”; bullies were chainiks, or “teapots.” To “soak” someone was to kill them. (The terms—“wet work” and mokroye delo—are identical in English and Russian.) Like the Yakuza, thieves-in-law covered themselves with tattoos. The vory recognized no higher authority, except for that of the skhodka (“thieves’ council”) when one was convened. They saw themselves as “honest thieves” in a dishonest world. In fact, they were a terrible menace. “A minority even amongst the criminals, they contented themselves largely with preying on the petty and political prisoners,” Galeotti writes. “They terrorised and abused them, stealing their food and clothing, forcing them from the warmer bunks in the barracks, beating, even raping, with virtual impunity.”

The vor’s reign of terror, which ran parallel to the state’s, lasted well into the 1940s. Then, during the suchya voina—the “bitches’ war,” which broke out in 1948—the thieves’ code began to break down. In the first years of the second world war, Stalin had amnestied close to one million prisoners and drafted them into the army. These convicts, who had been promised their freedom, found themselves back in the camps when the fighting was done. By the thieves’ code, they were suki—bitches who had put on uniforms and picked up arms for the state. But these suki outnumbered the vory, and they had been battle-hardened. Along with Soviet troops who had been sent to the Gulag upon repatriation (those who had been taken as POWs or had fought for the Germans in General Andrei Vlasov’s Russian Liberation Army), they were the first prisoners who managed to stand up to the vory. Gulag administrators encouraged their acts of

resistance. In one mining camp, 150 well-armed suki were sent into battle with a hundred unarmed thieves. “The result was a massacre,” Galeotti writes. Ten thieves surrendered, becoming suki themselves, while the rest were killed.

The suki won their war. They tattooed themselves if they weren’t tattooed already, absorbed the thieves’ slang, and started to call themselves vory v zakone. In doing so, they debased the thieves’ code even further. These new vory worked inside the camps as stool pigeons, supervisors, and enforcers. Collaboration with state security forces became the norm, rather than an offense punishable by excommunication or death, and this, more or less, is where things stand today.

The next generation of Russian gangsters grew up in and around the Brezhnev-era black markets, smuggling, shaking down fruit-sellers and merchants, and providing protection from similar shakedowns. In effect they were already a mafia, but it was Mikhail Gorbachev who gave birth to the thieves that Russians, and the rest of us, live with today. In 1985, following the death (from cirrhosis, among other things) of Konstantin Chernenko, Gorbachev became head of the Communist Party. Almost immediately, he launched a far-reaching anti-alcohol campaign. Prices on spirits were raised, production was cut, and access to liquor and wine was curtailed drastically. While the campaign was in force, Russia’s drinking age was raised from eighteen to twenty-one, workers found to be drunk on the job were punished (the fines could equal two weeks’ wages), and moonshiners were heavily fined or sent to prison.

In the short term, these measures worked. There were fewer workplace accidents, fewer deaths caused by drunk driving, and fewer incidents of domestic violence. Overall, mortality rates fell dramatically. But for the gangsters, Gorbachev’s temperance campaign was a godsend. Bootlegging “provided the criminals with not only a market but a constituency,” Galeotti writes. Suddenly, thieves were welcome everywhere, and honest citizens—ones who had never encountered a vor—were glad to make use of their services. “People were pleased to see us, they would smile and joke, offer us cigarettes,” a criminal explains. “They would ask us what we had today, like we were shopkeepers.”

Vladimir Putin riding with the Night Wolves, Russia, 2011
Alexey Druzhinen/AFP/Getty Images
Vladimir Putin riding with the Night Wolves at a motorbike festival in Novorossiysk, Russia, August 2011
Economic measures introduced under perestroika also had unintended consequences. In 1988, the Law on Cooperatives made it possible for Russians to open small legal businesses, which immediately attracted the attention of the protection rackets. At the same time, wrestlers, boxers, martial arts experts, amateur bodybuilders, and Afgantsy (veterans of Russia’s war in Afghanistan) formed private security companies and offered their services, which could cost enterprises as much as 30 percent of their revenues. Very quickly, having a krysha (a “roof”) became the cost of doing business in Soviet Russia. The courts were corrupt. The police were

corrupt and impotent. A true, modern-day mafia began to emerge. And then, just as quickly, the country collapsed.

Vouchers that Boris Yeltsin's government passed out to all Russian citizens could be exchanged for shares of state companies that the government was privatizing. But the one voucher each citizen got was worth very little, about $8.30, in Galeotti's estimate; people sold theirs for pennies. In 1993, Galeotti watched individuals get bussed to Moscow street corners, where they stood and held up signs that read, "I Buy Vouchers." Many "were working for organized crime," he writes:

The gangs aggregated the vouchers into meaningful batches and either used them or, far more often, sold them on to managers eager to take over their own enterprise, or to the rising oligarchs out shopping for bargains. Thus, Russian organized crime was from the first not just part of the emerging system but a stakeholder able to help shape its evolution.

The Vory is less a history of Russian organized crime than an anatomy of latter-day criminal rackets. Each chapter is split into dossier-like sections—"The protection market and its understandings," "'Pax Mafiosa' or global economy?"—based on first-hand observations, interviews with criminals and law enforcement officials, and several decades' worth of research. As the book moves into the 1990s—boom years for Russian gangsters—its tone begins to turn elegiac.

In part this is because, under Yeltsin's administration, Russia's gangsters killed each other off in ever-increasing numbers. But at the same time, a new class of criminal was starting to emerge. This was the avtoritet (the "authority"), a crime boss who had legal holdings as well as illegal ones, and would have been hard-pressed to explain the difference between himself and other Russian capitalists. "In the early years," one tells Galeotti, "we fought because we had to, but [under Yeltsin], we could settle down and become businessmen rather than generals." Testifying before the House Committee on Banking and Financial Services, in 1999, former CIA Director James Wolsey said:

If you should chance to strike up a conversation with an articulate, English-speaking Russian in, say, the restaurant of one of the luxury hotels along Lake Geneva, and he is wearing a $3,000 suit and a pair of Gucci loafers, and he tells you that he is an executive of a Russian trading company and wants to talk to you about a joint venture, then there are four possibilities. He may be what he says he is. He may be a Russian intelligence officer working under commercial cover. He may be part of a Russian organized crime group. But the really interesting possibility is that he may be all three—and that none of those three institutions have any problem with the arrangement.

In 2000, Vladimir Putin took power and established a semblance of order. As he did so the avtoritety were absorbed into the state. "In many ways," Galeotti writes, the Kremlin's unspoken truce with the criminal class "paralleled Putin's taming of the oligarchs, the mega-rich

businessmen who had become such a politically powerful force under Yeltsin." Criminal bosses who stuck to their rackets, cooperated with state security forces, and didn't interfere in politics were allowed to thrive. Those who did not were eliminated or sent into exile. By then, Galeotti points out, the turf battles of the 1990s had already been settled. Organized crime had become bureaucratic, more business-minded than bloody, and when blood was called for, "it was in a far more precise and targeted way, the sniper's bullet supplanting the indiscriminate car bomb or drive-by shooting that had been such a bloody fixture" of the Yeltsin era.

The price that Russians have paid, in the course of normalizing corruption, graft, and occasional violence, is one that Americans would do well to consider. At the street level, there is the vogue for criminal style, criminal speech, and criminal ballads—russky shanson—that might be compared to the narcocorridos sung in Mexico to commemorate drug lords. At the imperial level, there is Putin's macho posturing, his own public and pointed use of thieves' slang (including his famous threat to "soak" Chechen terrorists "in their shithouses"), and his close embrace of the Night Wolves, a thuggish gang of bikers he's been known to ride with (albeit on a three-wheeled motorcycle).

From the highest levels on down, terminal cynicism has become endemic, even integral to society's workings. "Putinism appealed directly to cynicism," the scholar Greg Afinogenov has written. "The substance of the appeal was not the preservation of democratic institutions but their increasing irrelevance. Everyone knew the score, and it was by virtue of knowing the score that one became a supporter of the regime."2 Of course, in the twentieth century, Soviet citizens were cynical, too. But there was at least the idea that things could be different, and were in fact different elsewhere. These days, Russia's meddling in foreign banking systems and foreign elections is no more or less than an extension of the idea that brute force, corruption, and sneering contempt for the law—the thieves' way, reduced to its essence—is just the way of the entire world.

And what of the vory v zakone, who defined themselves in opposition to a body politic that seems, finally, to have absorbed them? For all intents and purposes, they no longer exist outside of national memory. ("We have been infected by the rest of you and we are dying," one old hand tells Galeotti, who adds, "the infection has passed both ways.") There is no reason to mourn their passing. And yet the vory had their laws and codes, however brutal. Whatever nostalgia Russians feel for them now might also be seen as a form of longing for codes and covenants, of any kind, and as a measure of the social fabric's unraveling.

1
See Federico Varese, "The Society of the Vory-v-Zzakone, 1930s–1950s," Cahiers du Monde russe, Vol. 39, No. 4 (1998), reprinted in Russian and Post-Soviet Organized Crime, edited by Mark Galeotti (Ashgate, 2002). ↩

2
Greg Afinogenov, "The Politics of Cynicism," n+1, July 24, 2012. ↩