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Partisans or Cop Killers? The Fight for Justice in Russia's Far East

Six years ago, a group of youngsters went on a violent rampage against the police. A new trial is unlikely to bring them relief.

By Eva Hartog

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An unsteady, homemade video catches an unmistakable look of triumph on the face of Andrei Sukhorada.

"We beat the policeman up and then we shot him in the head," says the young man with blond, millimeter-length hair. "He cried out: 'Help me!'" Sukhorada smiles.

Sitting next to him are other young Russian men, dressed in military fatigues and holding firearms. Most of them are from the small village of Kirovsky in the Primorye region in Russia's Far East. Though only in their teens and early twenties, they say in a video that they

have been driven to despair by a life filled with police abuse. The video has since been labeled extremist by the Russian authorities.

"We're honest people and you're scum," says one. "That's why we'll wage war against you until the very end, until you kill us or we win. You'll probably kill us first."

The comment elicits a round of sniggers from the rest.

For several months in 2010, the group known as the Primorsky Partizany targeted police in violent attacks. It was an instance of armed civilian resistance to the authorities unrivaled in Russian contemporary history. Two local officers were killed, one of whom was brutally knifed — "like a dog, like a pig," according to the gang's video. The authorities reacted by sending in hundreds of OMON riot police officers and several tanks and helicopters. It took them several months to hunt down the self-professed cop killers in a cat-and-mouse game that transfixed the nation.

On July 13, the Primorsky Partizany made their closing statements in a Vladivostok court, as the battle to decide whether they are coldblooded killers or freedom fighters enters its seventh year.

A few hours after recording their video from a forest hideout, two of the gang members, Sukhorada and Alexander Sladkikh, were dead. According to the official account, they had preferred to commit suicide rather than surrender following a shootout with police in the city of Ussuriysk. Another four fighters were detained and put on trial, alongside two other local residents — Alexei Nikitin and Vadim Kovtun, the brother of one of the Partizany.

In April 2014, a regional court handed the group sentences ranging from 22 years to life in prison. On top of the murders of two policemen and the injuring of six others during several shootouts, the group was also blamed with an entirely separate case involving the deaths of four local residents a year earlier. According to the court, these four had worked as security guards at a hemp plantation and the Partizany had killed them as part of a drugs feud.

Last May, Russia's Supreme Court softened the sentences. It also referred the case back to the regional court, ruling that the link between the suspects and the reported drugs killings of 2009 was insufficiently strong.

The retrial, which began earlier this year, could be seen as a correction of previous injustice. After years in detention, the two defendants who were involved in the case only on the basis of the drug killing charges, Kovtun and Nikitin, could suddenly walk free. "I've been labeled a 'partisan,' but I've never been part of any group, or had any interest in weapons.▪ I don't drink, don't smoke, don't use drugs," Nikitin, who claims he ▪was dragged into the case as revenge for filing a complaint about police▪ corruption, said at
a July 12 court hearing,
according to the Interfax news agency.

For the "real" Partizany members, the benefits of the retrial are less obvious.

Relatives of the suspects and their legal representation were unable to comment on the case due to a gag order while the trial is ongoing. But a source close to the Partizany, who asked to

remain anonymous, said it was possible the suspects would now receive separate sentences for the civilians' murders — meaning they would still spend their lives in jail.

The Partizany on trial have denied any involvement in the drug killings. They also deny they personally murdered anyone, blaming their dead companions for the deaths of the police officers. But whether or not they killed, the local population is behind them.

"They've become legends," says journalist Oleg Kashin, who has followed the Partizany case closely from its beginnings. "There's graffiti in different regions saying 'Hail to the Primorsky Partizany' and 'Freedom to the partisans.'"

The Primorye region has barely transitioned out of the 1990s mobster justice that rocked Russia in early its post-Soviet years.

Kashin visited the Partizany's hometown and spoke to their relatives. "The standard fate of a young person in this region is to end up in prison and then, if they're lucky, land a job involving heavy, dirty work for no money, with zero prospects," he says.

Rather than offering a solution, law enforcement is seen as part of the problem, accused of managing drug dealing, prostitution and illegal logging. Relatives of the Partizany have told the media the group's members all had a long history of suffering violence at the hands of local police.

"These Partizany are people who could no longer take the system of police terror and did the only thing they knew how," the source close to the Partizany says. "No one knows what we would've done had we been in their shoes."

The police's reputation is not much better elsewhere in the country. According to a nationwide survey by the independent Levada Center pollster, which was carried out the same year as the Partizany's guerilla campaign, 80 percent of respondents said they considered police abuse a serious problem. When asked who presented a greater threat to them, the police or the Primorsky Partizany, respondents were split 34 to 37 percent.

Concerned over the growing potential for uprising in Russia — the year after the Partizany's campaign, tens of thousands of disgruntled voters took to the streets in Moscow in anti-Kremlin protests — the authorities were keen to fight the view of the Partizany as justice fighters.

State-run media and public prosecutors have portrayed the gang as a bunch of ordinary bandits, knee-deep in dirty dealings.

"These boys clearly watched too many movies and decided to play a game of war," a witness testifying against the group was cited as saying in court on July 6.

Meanwhile, the Partizany's supporters are trying to correct what they see as a state-run misinformation campaign against the group. Performance artist Pyotr Pavlensky, who this year came to prominence for setting on fire the entrance of the headquarters of the Russian secret services, is one of their most vocal backers.

Earlier this year, Pavlensky promised to donate the prize money of the Vaclav Havel award he

had received to pay the legal fees of private human rights lawyers. But the award was later rescinded by organizers, who said they could not support a group "employing violence to achieve its aims."

It means that, for now, the Partizany's defense will be in the hands of lawyers appointed by the very state they once sought to fight. Their main hopes lie with the court's jury, set to issue a verdict on July 19.

"I want you to make a balanced decision," defendant Maxim Kirillov told the jury during the final hearing on Wednesday. "Our fates are in your hands. Be just."

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