

INVISIBLE IN PLAIN SIGHT:
THE TROUBLING CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE
NATIONAL HOCKEY LEAGUE AND THE RUSSIAN MAFIA

by

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ABSTRACT

Professional sports leagues in North America have seen scandals, controversies, and tragedies. There is, however, a forgotten scandal that happened in the 1990s: the Russian Mafia came dangerously close to the National Hockey League. This thesis explores the alleged Mafia connections by examining newspaper and magazine articles and documentaries focused on the issue. The limited public response to allegations of Russian Mafia involvement is contrasted with other professional sports controversies that were met with an immediate response by the leagues and fans. How North Americans viewed Russians during the post-Soviet era is also explored in this paper.

This thesis examines why evident Mafia involvement with National Hockey League players did not provoke attention and sanctions by the league nor an outcry from the fans. This study will conclude the League did not react to the allegations because it felt as if the games were not harmed directly. Also, hockey fans did not find the allegations surprising because of the media's constant reports of corruption within Russia's borders, especially involving organized crime. Perhaps the lack of reaction by the National Hockey League and its fans suggests why this particular scandal is forgotten a mere 20 years later.

To my father, who instilled in me a love of sports. This one is for you.

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CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION

Professional sports in North America provide various types of entertainment for the public. The fierce competition can attract people from different socioeconomic backgrounds, races, and cultures. Sports have brought different people together for many reasons, including to watch their favorite team succeed. However, when something is successful economically, corruption often follows. Sports are vulnerable to corruption, not only for financial reasons but also to gain advantage in intense rivalries and key matches on a worldwide stage. Games that once were assumed to be honest have been infiltrated by criminals for decades. It is inevitable for criminals to try to find ways to gain access to successful organizations, especially when it comes to sports.

One of the first sports organizations to be harmed by criminals was Major League Baseball (MLB). During the 1919 World Series, eight White Sox players intentionally lost in order to earn money betting on the Cincinnati Reds. As a result, the eight players were banned from professional baseball for life. This infamous story is often referred to as one of the largest criminal infiltrations in an organized sport. As a result of the “Black Sox” scandal, MLB and other sports organizations did whatever they could to prevent this type of criminal activity happening again. In general, the prevention measures taken by professional sports organizations have been successful. Only several instances of gambling and game fixing have occurred. However, it is very difficult for leagues to manage everything that occurs in the lives of their players.

The National Hockey League (NHL) has not seen much controversy off the ice. One of the biggest problems the League has faced is the violence associated with the game. Fighting has always been associated with the game of hockey, including large-scale brawls. Nicknames for teams, like the Broad Street Bullies, known professionally as the Philadelphia Flyers, are comical ways of referring to the brawl-like nature of the game of hockey. Despite the violence within the game, which is generally managed by officials, another controversy occurred off the ice during the 1990s.

The National Hockey League was the fastest growing North American professional sports league in the 1990s. As the Soviet Union fell, the best players from the Eastern Bloc were sought by the NHL. However, these players brought extra baggage along with them from the former Soviet Union. The media reported on allegations of extortion, friendly relationships, and business connections between the Russian Mafia and professional National Hockey League players. Some players denied the allegations of extortion or friendships, while others were outspoken about their fear of the Russian Mafia.¹

Russia was in disarray after the fall of the Soviet Union. The 1990s brought an era of reconstruction for the Russian government and economy, and it was a difficult time for eastern Europeans who did not know how to adjust to capitalism. This new era left Russia vulnerable to corruption on multiple levels, including the sports leagues. Russians and Eastern Europeans had pride in their Soviet hockey legacy, which included multiple Olympic gold medals and international victories. It was no surprise that the National Hockey League wanted to recruit the best players who had achieved so much success with the Soviet teams. The NHL also saw this as

¹ *Frontline*, "Mafia Power Play," season 17, episode 14, September 1, 2014 (originally aired October 12, 1999).

an opportunity to bring in a wider audience by bringing in the talented players they once feared to face on the international stage.

Unfortunately for Russia, the recruitment of its most elite players could not have come at a worse time. With the collapse of the Soviet Union came the collapse of the Soviet hockey leagues. “The once powerful Red Army team struggles to survive,” said Linden MacIntyre in the PBS *Frontline* documentary “Mafia Power Play.” “They don’t even have enough hockey sticks for everybody.”² What made matters worse was the recruitment of their best players into the National Hockey League. When the talent left, the fans lost interest. The lack of fans, poor facilities, and stoppage of the generous government subsidies led the Red Army team to call for help, which led to the Pittsburgh Penguins buying a piece of the team. Inevitably, criminal activity came along with the new influx of money and popularity in the Russian hockey leagues as well as other facets of Russian life.³

Criminal elements collected money from assorted areas within the leagues, including concessions and players’ and coaches’ contracts. Then, the Mafia looked for even more ways to branch out and make more money. They targeted National Hockey League players for various reasons. News about multimillion-dollar player contracts were published in Russian newspapers. This exposure led the Mafia to try to extort money for protection from the players. The players, being young and naïve, did not know any better than to cooperate. And more significantly, their families were still in Europe, making it easy for the Mafia to threaten the players’ families.⁴

² Ibid., Linden MacIntyre on the Red Army team.

³ Ibid., Linden MacIntyre on criminals finding opportunities in the league.

⁴ News reports on the alleged extortion attempts discussed the potential harm of the players having their families in Eastern Europe. According to the reports, players paid for protection of their families who still lived in Russia and Eastern Europe. This was first reported by Réjean Tremblay, “Viatcheslav Fetisov paierait pour «la protection» de sa famille,” *La Presse*, December 23, 1993.

The accusations of extortion involving threats to families were the first stories to hit Canada and the United States about the alleged Mafia connections. The controversy was left alone for a few years after the initial shock of the media reports. In 1998, however, *Details* magazine reported on friendly relationships between Russian NHL players and certain Mafia bosses. Well known players like Valery Kamensky, Vyacheslav Fetisov, and Pavel Bure had personal and business relationships with men the FBI considered as leaders of the Russian mob. Although there was constant denial by players and mob associates, the evidence led the FBI and the media to believe there was something to be concerned about. Oddly, the NHL and fans did not see it the same way.

Why did an American professional sports league such as the National Hockey League, not respond to the situation as it had to past sports scandals? Why did NHL fans show little reaction to the issue of their team's players having ties with the Russian Mafia? Why did this issue generate so little reaction? This particular scandal broke nearly 20 years ago. With allegations so incriminating yet fascinating, it is perplexing that it was forgotten. The media reacted to the issue when it was reported, but how well represented was the problem in the news beyond the initial reports on the scandal? It may seem that various newspapers and articles reacted to the larger issues, such as politics and criminality; however, the media did not spend as much time on the National Hockey League, which may have contributed to the lack of interest by the Canadian and American publics. With that said, the National Hockey League has a rule for players to hold themselves to the highest of standards, on and off the ice. This rule applies to anything that could harm the best interest of the club, league, or the game in general. Any player who associates with criminals is, in a way, breaking this NHL rule. The National Hockey League did not respond, and the issue faded from view.

In this study, I will conclude the National Hockey League did not react to the allegations because the League felt it was not disrupting any games. Although the best interest of the League may have been questioned by the media, the NHL believed the integrity of the game was not harmed. The National Hockey League was more concerned over the integrity of the game rather than the principles and reputation of the organization.

Hockey fans did not show any concern for several reasons. First, the National Hockey League did not suspend, fine, or hand out any form of punishment. If the League did indeed punish a player for his friendship with a criminal, fans would have reacted. Also, the news coming out of Russia shaped the fans' opinions. The media constantly reported on the organized crime that took over Russia, including the Eastern European hockey leagues. NHL fans believed Russian players who came over to North America were inevitably being followed by criminals. For decades, North Americans were told the Soviet Union was backwards, corrupt, and different from western society. This belief carried over after the collapse of the Soviet Union with stories about the Russian Mafia.

Previous scholars and sports journalists have written about Soviet hockey, the players, and their journeys into the National Hockey League. Also, there are contributions in the literature to infamous sports scandals, including the Black Sox scandal, the links between boxing and organized crime, and other personal controversies. Literature about the Russian Mafia in the United States and Canada mentions the issue of Russian NHL players and organized crime, but the works do not go into detail. I will focus on the issue of the Mafia involvement with players from the National Hockey League in the 1990s and the reaction of the NHL and the media to those connections. My analysis will examine the possible reasons why the public had little response to the situation.

To support my thesis, I will be looking at several types of historiographical materials. I will focus on the historiography of hockey, the Russian Mafia in North America, and scandals in sports. The historiography of hockey is not as extensive as for other sports. The literature focuses on statistics, influential players, and key moments in hockey history. There are also books and articles about Soviet Hockey discussing matches between the Soviets and North American hockey, Olympic events, and the Soviet leagues. For example, Lawrence Martin's monograph *The Red Machine: The Soviet Quest to Dominate Canada's Game* described the dominance of the Soviet national team. The Soviets' playing style was center stage whenever they played NHL teams or all-stars, which inevitably changed the North American players' way of approaching the game. Martin's work in particular has also explained the Soviet approach to the game, both on and off the ice.

Breakaway: From Behind the Iron Curtain to the NHL—The Untold Story of Hockey's Great Escapes is a 2012 publication by Tal Pinchevsky, focusing on hockey players who came from the Eastern Bloc to the United States and Canada. There is a mention in Pinchevsky's book about the Mafia, but it is minimal. For example, Alex Mogilny's extortion problem by his friend Sergei Formachev in March of 1994 was described as an "attempt."⁵ Pinchevsky's mention of the issue is one of the few analyses in the historiography of hockey. Regardless, this particular book did explain the influence of the media in spreading the story.

I have examined the historiography on Russian organized crime in North America to broaden my approach. Unfortunately, there are few acknowledgments of the National Hockey League in this particular historiography. Regardless, one book offered a deep analysis on the issue at hand. Published in 2000, *Red Mafiya: How the Russian Mob Has Invaded America*

⁵ Tal Pinchevsky. *Breakaway: From Behind the Iron Curtain to the NHL--The Untold Story of Hockey's Great Escapes* (Mississauga, ON: John Wiley & Sons Canada, Ltd., 2012), 219.

dedicated an entire chapter to the Mafia's influence on hockey. Robert I. Friedman, the author of *Red Mafiya*, penned a *Details Magazine* article in 1998 describing the relationship of the Russian Mafia and professional hockey players, an article that stirred a controversy. This article was rewritten and inserted into his study that focused on the Russian mob in America. His thorough chapter on the Mafia's "power play" in the NHL is significant to my research. It provided more details into the scandal, including specific stories and relationships between players and the Russian mob, which will be discussed in Chapter Two.

There is a plethora of secondary sources focusing on scandals in sports. Despite the minimal discussions on the issue at hand, there is a gap in the historiography on a scandal that occurred twenty years ago. Nevertheless, the National Hockey League's response to the allegations can be understood by referring to other sports scandals. Stanley H. Teitelbaum's monograph *Sports Heroes, Fallen Idols* and other articles discussing specific scandals helped enhance the research focusing on how the leagues and organizations dealt with the controversies.

The best approach to the Russian Mafia hockey scandal is to look at the cultural and political influences of Russian and North American sports in the 1990s. Whether we see it or not, politics is a key element in professional sports leagues. Foreign players act in roles similar to diplomats in the United States and Canada. For example, the Russian players are representatives of their country, customs, and culture, just as much as a local player is for his team.

To discuss the political aspect behind this controversy, the relationship of Russian sports professionals and post-Soviet issues related to sports will be explored. For instance, when the Soviet Union fell, the hockey leagues disintegrated as well. As the best players were moving west to North America, they became targets of the Russian mob. Since there were political and economic issues in the Motherland, criminals followed these men to the "land of plenty." The

United States and Canada saw Russian NHL players as talented men who were contributing to their professional teams. However, they did not realize they attracted criminal behavior through their fame and fortune. For fans to hear that a member of their favorite team was involved with organized crime is not an old issue—organized crime has been present in sports for decades. Regardless, this is a recent example of organized crime in sports, specifically from the former Soviet Union. During the 1990s, the media reported on Mafia-related crime in Russia. The media’s interpretation of the crimes in Russia may have influenced certain ideas of the Mafia, causing the public to misinterpret Russians in North America. The cultural differences and political aspect behind the issue cannot be ignored when attempting to understand this particular controversy.

There are several documentaries, interviews, and documents representing the scandal. In 1999, PBS’s documentary series *Frontline* aired an episode titled “Mafia Power Play.” In this hour-long episode, the issue of Russian NHL players having relationships with the Mafia, friendly or not, was discussed in great detail. There were several key interviews in this particular documentary, including reactions from Russian hockey superstars Pavel Bure and Vyacheslav Fetisov, both players who had personal relationships with men who were believed to be top Mafia bosses. Linden MacIntyre of *Frontline* also interviewed the legal representative of the National Hockey League. The league’s official reaction to the situation is crucial in the understanding of its stance in the situation and how it responded to the problem. This particular documentary also sparked reactions from North American and Russian newspapers, including

the *Moscow Times*. One particular article described the FBI's investigation of alleged mob leader Anzor Kikalishvili as "anti-Russian prejudice."⁶

This thesis is also a social history. Newspaper and magazine articles from various cities in the United States and Canada are vital to the understanding of the media's influence over the situation. The media's interpretation of the allegations, as well as the view North Americans have of Russians in general can also explain the understanding of the public towards the controversy. Western societies did not have a complete view of what life was like in the Soviet Union. The fall of the Soviet Union also brought Eastern Europeans to the West, which inevitably shared what life was like in the USSR. Acknowledging the differences between the east and west is important in understanding the media's reaction, as well as the hockey fans' response to the allegations.

It is also important to understand how different sports scandals were reported and remembered. For the third chapter, there will be a focus on other sports scandals that made a cultural and social affect in North American society. For example, the Black Sox of 1919 and the boxing and Italian Mafia controversies have changed the way of running professional sports. There was a direct impact on the game, which led to players being banned for life and criminals going to prison. These scandals, as well as other individuals who found themselves in controversial situations, will be related to the Russian Mafia and the National Hockey League allegations.

Unfortunately, I do not have access to Russian documents relating to the Mafia. These documents are absent from this thesis for several reasons: I am not fluent in Russian; documents

⁶ Gennady Fyodorov, "'Godfather' of Sports Denies Links To Mafia." *Moscow Times*, November 19, 1996. <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/godfather-of-sports-denies-link-to-mafia/315956.html>. (accessed September 22, 2013).

related to Russian organized crime are not easy to obtain; and my focus is primarily on the North American perspective. I am looking at the reactions of American and Canadian media, the National Hockey League, and the lasting impression on the American and Canadian public. Of course it is important to understand the Russian hockey structure, both during and after the Soviet Union. If my intention were to look at the Russian Mafia in more detail, perhaps using Russian documents would apply here.

Sports fans are passionate about their favorite team and players. Fans are sure to react when a controversy surrounds their team. Throughout my research, I was looking for hockey fans who wrote to *Sports Illustrated* or newspapers that reported on the alleged Mafia connections. Unfortunately, I was unable to find such responses. However, I was able to find reactions to *Frontline*'s "Mafia Power Play" on the PBS website. Viewers of the documentary wrote in expressing how they felt about the episode. The reactions were split down the middle. Some said they were intrigued, while others felt the documentary was an attempt to harm the players' images.⁷ Although the informal reactions by the viewers were insightful, I will not include this information in my research. I want to know the initial reactions by hockey fans. The fact there was a silence throughout the fan base during the time of the allegations shows they were more concerned about how the League would react. Since the League did not react, the fans felt there was nothing to worry about.

Chapter Two will discuss the allegations of Russian Mafia influence with Russian National Hockey League players. The initial reports from December 1993 raised concern when names were dropped about alleged extortion attempts. A couple of years later, players such as Vyacheslav Fetisov, Pavel Bure, and Valeri Kamensky were tied to Mafia leaders as business

⁷ The reactions by the *Frontline* viewers can be seen on the PBS website for "Mafia Power Play" under "Join the Discussion." <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/hockey/talk/>.

partners and friends. News reports on these players and their associates circulated in the press, including documentaries focusing on the potential threat of Mafia infiltration of the NHL. This particular chapter will describe certain stories and incidences surrounding the National Hockey League and the Russian Mafia.

Chapter Three goes beyond the headlines and focuses on the League itself. Questions will be raised about the National Hockey League's response and stance on the issue. This chapter will also discuss infamous sports scandals that were met with a swift response by the leagues and organizations and, in some cases, the authorities. Also, issues continue in Russia with the Mafia and the hockey leagues. For instance, violence and deadly consequences wreaked havoc in Russian hockey. The stories coming from Russia will relay back to the discussion of what may threaten the NHL. In addition, the morality clause that is part of the professional players' contracts and what is expected of the players by the NHL in the best interest of the League will be discussed. Did the Russian hockey players who associated with the Russian Mafia break this part of the contract?

Chapter Four focuses on the press and NHL fans. The question of why this particular scandal did not leave a lasting impression on hockey fans is explored. The legacy of other sports controversies, such as the Black Sox, gambling and fixing, and individual athletes committing crimes, are often discussed today. The Mafia-NHL concern began twenty years ago, but is relatively forgotten today. This chapter will come to a conclusion as to why NHL fans, and the North American public alike, did not find the allegations alarming. Overall, the purpose of this research is to come to a better understanding of the allegations and connections, why the National Hockey League stood idly by, and the not-so-lasting impression of the scandal on the

most important component of sports, the fans. Chapter Five presents conclusions based on my research findings.

CHAPTER TWO

ORGANIZED PLAY—HOW THE RUSSIAN MAFIA FOUND ITS PLACE IN THE NHL

Soviet Hockey Dominance

The Soviet Union was a significant topic of interest in the western world before its dissolution. For decades, the world feared that anything could erupt as the Cold War continued to intensify. Politics, threats, spies, and intense negotiations were constantly discussed in western media. The intense situation of east versus west was not only in the arms race: the war on ice was heating up. The Soviet Union's national hockey team dominated matches in the Olympics, international competitions, and in friendly tournaments against the National Hockey League's best. Their dominance in ice hockey led the National Hockey League to reconsider how they played the game and who could enter the NHL draft. According to Lawrence Martin in his 1990 monograph *The Red Machine: The Soviet Quest to Dominate Canada's Game*, the Soviets essentially saved Canada's game by improving the style.⁸

The Soviet hockey program was unstoppable before the fall of the Iron Curtain. The national team, also known as the Red Army team, not only dominated nearly every opponent they faced for several decades and they did so beautifully. The Winter Olympics was often the main stage for the Soviet Union to show their athletic power. However, in 1972, the best of the Soviet Union faced Canada's top players in a friendly eight-game playoff, known as the Summit

⁸ Lawrence Martin. *The Red Machine: The Soviet Quest to Dominate Canada's Game*. (Toronto: Doubleday Canada Limited, 1990), 3.

Series. Although the Canadians found themselves in dire straights during the first few matches, they came out on top against the Soviets in a 4-3-1 series win. Despite the victory for the Canadians and essentially the National Hockey League, the Soviets remained dominant in international play, including exhibition games against NHL teams. “Through their example,” explained Martin, “through their humiliation of Canada’s all-stars, the Russians would make Canadians rethink their negative, smash-and-grab power game and turn toward the purer European way.”⁹ It was clear to the National Hockey League that they could not beat the Soviets if they continued to play “their” game. They had to adapt to the style of the Soviets, including their understanding of Soviet culture around the game.

In a *Sports Illustrated* article published in March of 1979 titled, “A Game That the NHL Can’t Win,” longtime Boston Bruins General Manager Harry Sinden, and coach of the 1972 Canadian team during the Summit Series, discussed differences between Soviet and NHL hockey. After the NHL All-Star team lost to the Soviets in the Challenge Cup series of 1979, Sinden described the loss as no surprise. “In essence, what these hockey confrontations—these so-called battles for world supremacy—have come down to is a clash of societies, and we in North America may well be in a no-win position.”¹⁰ In other words, Sinden described the noticeable differences between Soviet hockey and North American hockey. For example, hockey in the Soviet Union is nearly a year of “arduous daily labor on and off the ice that is programmed to achieve success in two or three international events each year.”¹¹ As for the NHL, the season has 80-plus games, and then “three or four months on the golf course.”¹²

⁹ Ibid., 3

¹⁰ Harry Sinden. “A Game That the NHL Can’t Win.” In *Sports Illustrated*. March 05, 1979.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

In essence, the Soviet national team was on top for a couple of decades. The National Hockey League could not keep up with their style, speed, and strength. Despite the idea of hockey as “Canada’s Game,” the Soviets were leading the world in international play, handing embarrassing losses to the National Hockey League. The Soviet players saw their involvement on the Russian National Team as a service, or an obligation to their country. According to Sinden, “The state funds all the hockey programs and makes them work—or else.”¹³ Hockey in North America was and still is approached as a business, while hockey in the Soviet Union was a conscripted service. Their goal was to have superiority in international competition, be it the Olympics, European tournaments, or exhibition matches versus the National Hockey League’s best.

With this understanding, the Soviet Union accomplished its goal and achieved world supremacy on ice for decades. However, in the mid-1980s, players from the Soviet Union were beginning to recognize that their leagues were not as good as they once were. “At this time,” explained Martin in *The Red Machine*, “the Soviets were still not allowing their skaters permission to play in the NHL, a development which could help, if not in the art of their game, then at least in gaining knowledge of how a good hockey league is run.”¹⁴ The top Soviet players saw their own league falling apart due to lack of funds, greedy owners and coaches, and overall disarray among the individual teams. There were players who expressed concern, and sometimes disgust, toward the way things were being run. It was not until *glasnost*, which essentially meant

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Martin, *The Red Machine*, 219.

“openness,” that players were able to express their wishes to play for the National Hockey League.¹⁵

The National Hockey League Lends Aid to Russia

During the 1980s, Soviet leagues were starting to lose the interest of spectators, as well as players. Constant struggles between player and coach or owner began to affect the game in the USSR. By the mid-1980s, eastern European players were showing interest in the National Hockey League. In *Sports Illustrated's* 1989 article “The Honeymooners,” sports journalist Jay Greenberg described the first few Soviet players to enter the league in 1989. “Thanks to *glasnost*, cuts in government subsidies to USSR sporting programs, and years of knocking on bureaucratic doors by the Calgary Flames, New Jersey Devils, and Vancouver Canucks, eight Soviet players have been given permission by their country to skate in the NHL this season.”¹⁶ The Soviet leagues lost many of their top players, and as a result, attendance figures dropped and financial hardship soon followed.

The opportunities in the National Hockey League outweighed the pride that was once felt in the Russian leagues. According to Greenberg, “The front door didn’t swing open for them to leave the Soviet Union until brilliant 20-year-old winger Alexander Mogilny sneaked out the back door to Buffalo in May of 1989.”¹⁷ The young and talented Mogilny’s defection to North America led leaders of the Soviet Union’s hockey program to wonder who might leave next. Not only did Mogilny and other Soviet players attract fame and fortune immediately in the National

¹⁵ Also known as Mikhail Gorbachev’s Soviet policy of ‘openness,’ *glasnost* is defined by the *Merriam-Webster* dictionary as “a Soviet policy permitting open discussion of political and social issues and freer dissemination of news and information.” Also according to the dictionary, the first known use of the term “*glasnost*” was in 1986. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/glasnost>.

¹⁶ Jay Greenberg, “The Honeymooners,” *Sports Illustrated*, October 9, 1989.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

Hockey League, the United States and Canada also offered education for the players. Mogilny, for example, spent six hours a day at the University of Buffalo to learn English.¹⁸ The opportunities in the United States were not the only factor in his defection. The treatment of himself and other players by the Soviet leagues was poor. The dormitory he lived in for eleven months out of the year was, in Mogilny's words, "like hospital."¹⁹ Unfortunately, Alexander Mogilny soon found himself the target of criminal activity, which will be discussed later in this chapter. Regardless, other Russian and eastern European players left their homelands to join the National Hockey League.

The National Hockey League was very appealing to the Soviet superstars, especially during a time of Soviet dissolution. As mentioned earlier, to play hockey in the Soviet Union was to perform a service to the country. According to Tal Pinchevsky in *Breakaway: From Behind the Iron Curtain to the N.H.L.—The Untold Story of Hockey's Great Escapes*, as the Soviet superstars became more exposed to western culture, they were discovering their worth in the game.²⁰ Because of this realization, multiple players left their homeland for the United States and Canada, leaving the Russian leagues to pick up the pieces. In PBS's documentary series *Frontline*, the episode titled "Mafia Power Play" described the dire conditions of the Russian hockey leagues. Even with numerous international championships, the Red Army team struggled to survive. *Frontline's* investigative reporter Linden MacIntyre explained how the Russian leagues struggled and reported on their idea to find help. "Until 1992, players like these [shown on the documentary] benefited from generous government subsidies. Then the funding stopped, and [Victor] Tikhonov and some other Red Army hockey officials came up with an unusual idea

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Tal Pinchevsky, *Breakaway: From Behind the Iron Curtain to the NHL—The Untold Story of Hockey's Greatest Escapes* (Mississauga, ON: John Wiley & Sons Canada, 2012), 158.

for raising new money: sell a piece of their team, called CSKA, to the Pittsburgh Penguins of the NHL.”²¹ The so-called “Russian Penguins” were born in 1993, when the Pittsburgh Penguins stepped in to essentially pick up the pieces of the Russian team. “Hockey star Mario Lemieux and actor Michael J. Fox were backing the new venture ... The first challenge was to spruce up the hockey players, no small task after several years of neglect.”²² According to Stephen Warshaw, the marketing consultant of the Russian Penguins, the team could not even afford jerseys.²³ “They had one set of uniforms for six different teams. So one team would come off the ice, their jerseys wringing wet with sweat, and give it to the next guy, and he’d put it on.” Warshaw continued, “And I can’t tell you how bad the locker room smelled. I mean, you could smell that clear to Vladivostok on the east coast of Russia.”²⁴

New hockey jerseys did lift the morale of the players and help ease the smell of the locker room. However, the bigger problem was getting fans to fill the seats. Not only was this a problem, it was not an easy one to solve. MacIntyre explained “the fans’ perception that the good players were all going west, and that Russian hockey wasn’t worth watching anymore.”²⁵ Stephen Warshaw and the marketing department had to come up with quick solutions to get fans in the arena. “Everybody loves beer around the world,” insisted Warshaw, “so we had a few free beer nights from our big sponsor, Iron City Beer.”²⁶ And he was right. The crowds came, including businessmen and corporate sponsors. Along with Iron City Beer, which had a \$600,000 three-year contract with the team, major companies jumped on the opportunity to connect to the growing capitalism in Russia through the Central Army Club. Canadian Cycle & Motor (CCM), a

²¹ *Frontline*, “Mafia Power Play.”

²² *Ibid.*, Linden MacIntyre, narrator and correspondent for *Frontline*.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, Stephen Warshaw on the Russian hockey league.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, MacIntyre.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, Warshaw.

Canadian sports-equipment company, became a big sponsor of the team as well. Coca-Cola, McDonald's, and Kraft "have put up a lot of dough to plaster their names on such things as pads and gloves and the Zamboni."²⁷

The team's improving performance, free beer, and corporate sponsorships were not the only reasons for the increased attendance. Jeffrey Lilley explained unusual gimmicks in the *Sports Illustrated* article, "Russian Revolution" from 1994: "Gorbachev-Yeltsin look-alike contests to young women stripping down to bikinis on the ice to dancing bears to barrel-jumping contests to blonde female acrobat sliding down a rope and handing the referee the puck for a face-off."²⁸ Along with the unorthodox sideshows, the arena was looking more like a National Hockey League setting with rock n' roll music, darken arenas, and elaborate introductions of the Russian Penguins.²⁹

"Where There's Money, There's Mafia"

Now that the team had an audience, they could finally play the game that was once falling apart. The arenas were beginning to look like National Hockey League stadiums with thousands of people turning up. Regrettably, questionable characters were among the people who attended the games. "We did it too well," explained Warshaw, "and the criminal element started to come to our games, started to enjoy our games, started to evict our corporate sponsors out of their 'super boxes.'"³⁰ "In some hockey arenas in Moscow," explained Lilley, "hoods dressed in

²⁷ Jeffrey Lilley, "Russian Revolution," *Sports Illustrated*, January 10, 1994.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ *Frontline*, "Mafia Power Play." Stephen Warshaw on sightings of the Mafia at Russian hockey league games.

gangster-style leather trench coats—long enough to hide automatic weapons—mill about in the corridors within sight of the dressing rooms.”³¹

What exactly was going on in these arenas? The unfortunate ramifications of not only the sports system in Russia but also the political arena were being overrun by the Russian Mafia. This is an example of capitalism in a weak state. The Russian Mafia and other criminals saw an opportunity in the booming business of Russian hockey leagues. It was not just bribing and other forms of corruption; there was also murderous retaliations occurring in Moscow and other major Russian cities. “Assassination, once exclusively political, became a common crime in the years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In 1993, Moscow alone recorded 5,000 murders, most related to gang turf wars.”³² Some of the assassinations throughout the next few years included the business manager of the Red Army Club and the team’s photographer. Stephen Warshaw told Linden MacIntyre in “Mafia Power Play” he was threatened by criminals over a potential job offer by the Mafia partners of the Russian Penguins. “I asked him how much they’d pay me. And then, finally, when I told him it wasn’t enough money and started to laugh, he didn’t laugh. And he said, ‘Well, we’ll kill you for \$6,500.’”³³ Warshaw took the threat seriously because the Mafia was capable of following through with their threats.

“The fighting here in Moscow is very similar to that that occurred back in the 1920s and 1930s in New York City,” explained Jim Moody, former head of the FBI Organized Crime Unit.³⁴ When Moody was an FBI agent, he visited the Soviet Union and met with the top officials of the Soviet states. According to his account for *Frontline*, the Soviet Union had

³¹ Lilley, “Russian Revolution,” *Sports Illustrated*.

³² *Frontline*, “Mafia Power Play.” Linden MacIntyre on the corruption in Russia.

³³ *Ibid.*, Warshaw discussing a threat from the Mafia.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, Jim Moody, former head of the F.B.I. Organized Crime Unit.

problems with organized crime “beyond their capability.”³⁵ After the fall of the Soviet Union, the criminal elements grew stronger and took advantage of the vulnerable states of the former Soviet countries. “Where there’s money, there’s Mafia,” expressed MacIntyre.³⁶ The Mafia found ways to extort money, including threatening or offering protection from other criminals. According to Joseph Serio in *Investigating the Russian Mafia*, this particular tactic of the Mafia has been present in the Soviet Union for decades. “In some respects it was the forerunner of what would later be widely referred to as *krysha*, or roof, generally meaning protective services provided by criminal groups for businessmen.”³⁷ This was not just for Russians in the homeland; foreigners, especially western businessmen, were confronted by the Mafia offering *krysha*.

Back in the United States and Canada, the media were not only reporting this type of criminal activity to the public, they were running with it. With the fall of the Berlin Wall, the understanding of people from the former Soviet Union did not change in the minds of Americans. They saw the unfortunate circumstances of the countries in the Eastern Bloc, including the various reactions of the former Communists. The media made it known in the United States when crime began to rise in Russia, especially organized crime.

For example, in a *Sarasota Herald-Tribune* article from 1994, reports of Russian Mafia related crimes in the United States were discussed. One of the questions raised about the murders in Brooklyn and Brighton Beach was focused on Russian investigators wanting to cooperate with the United States. “Through an international network, the flourishing Russian ‘*mafiya*’ gets safe havens, new places to make and launder money, and new sophistication.”³⁸ The article continued

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., Linden MacIntyre.

³⁷ Joseph Serio, *Investigating the Russian Mafia: An Introduction for Students, Law Enforcement, and International Business* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2008), 178.

³⁸ “Authorities say organized crime is spreading from Russia to U.S.” *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*, February 16, 1994.

with details about how the Mafia was prevalent in Russia: “A recent report to President Boris Yeltsin warned that the [mafia] is strangling the Russian economy, extorting ‘protection’ money from three-quarters of the private enterprises in big cities.”³⁹ What American readers found frightening were reports of men who became experts in “dodging and defrauding bureaucracy” and putting their skills to work in the United States, including murder.⁴⁰ The reports of Russian crime would continue to rise as more evidence of the Mafia activities increased, including in unexpected places such as the North American sports leagues.

Russian Mafia Enters North America

Russian criminal behavior in the motherland was a problem. With rising numbers of assassinations, violence, extortion, and other criminal activities, it was no surprise the Mafia needed to expand globally. Russians were present in North America for several years before the influx of the Russian Mafia. According to James O. Finckenauer and Elin J. Waring in their book *Russian Mafia in America: Immigration, Culture, and Crime*, there were established Russian neighborhoods as early as the 1980s. Cities such as Philadelphia, Brighton Beach, Bustleton Avenue, and other surrounding areas had an increasing number of Russian immigrants. With the growth in population of people from the former Soviet Union, however, came the influx of criminals. “Newspaper articles about this new phenomenon of crimes involving Russian émigrés—most often in Brighton Beach (which by that time had become a thriving enclave of mainly Russians and Ukrainians) and in Philadelphia—began to appear in the early 1980s.”⁴¹

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ James O. Finckenauer and Elin J. Waring, *Russian Mafia in America: Immigration, Culture, and Crime*. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998), 68.

With the growth of the criminal activity in the Russian-American neighborhoods came the increased discussion of a Russian Mafia in the United States. According to Finckenauer and Waring, Russian criminals did not see themselves as the Mafia. In fact, the Soviet émigré criminals would refer to the Italian American criminal groups as the Mafia. As part of their research in *Russian Mafia in America*, Finckenauer and Waring asked their anonymous respondents whether they thought the Russian criminal activity was similar to Mafia-type crime. “All but one of the respondents said they knew what the Mafia was,” explained the authors. “As a businessman in his forties put it, ‘Everyone has watched *The Godfather* some time in their life.’”⁴² Finckenauer and Waring also found some of the respondents felt the Mafia and Soviet émigrés were similar. One respondent in particular had worked for a man who owned an Italian restaurant. “I recognized the conversations that occurred among the members of the Italian Mafia. These are the same conversations that occurred between the Russians.”⁴³

In essence, the Russian criminals, viewed the Mafia as an Italian organization. However, the activities and conversations were very similar to Soviet émigré crime. One particular respondent claimed he heard about the Russian Mafia through the media.⁴⁴ But the similarities were deafening. “The Italian Mafia is an ideal--an example of what a mafia should be like. Russians can only look and learn from them.”⁴⁵ Regardless of whether Russians believed there was a Russian Mafia, the crime was real, the people were real, and the problem in the United States and Canada was real.

⁴² Ibid, 224.

⁴³ Ibid, 225.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 225.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 227.

The Russian Mafia Breaks the Ice

On December 23, 1993, an article in Montreal's *La Presse* reported on Russian National Hockey League players who were allegedly paying the Russian Mafia for protection for their families.⁴⁶ Réjean Tremblay, the author of the article, sparked other North American newspapers to report on the controversy for the next few days. Vyacheslav "Slava" Fetisov of the New Jersey Devils, who was arguably the best Russian player in the NHL, was the main focus of the claims. According to the *Rocky Mountain News*, a Denver newspaper that translated Tremblay's article, many of the Russian NHL players were being forced to pay the Mafia in exchange for their families' protection back in the motherland.⁴⁷ Other players were among those named to have either been threatened or knew about the problem back in Russia. "Others, such as Alexei Yashin of the Ottawa Senators and Igor Larionov of the San Jose Sharks, have brought their families with them to North America."⁴⁸ Réjean Tremblay said players who refused to participate in the Mafia underground contracts were threatened with having their legs broken, or worse, with having their families harmed.⁴⁹

The corruption in the Russian hockey leagues was not a local problem anymore. With the success of the Russian Penguins, the Mafia looked for other ways to gain more revenue. The best Russian and eastern European players were moving west to North America seeking opportunities in the National Hockey League. Reports of the high-priced contracts of certain players were published in Russian newspapers. What was meant to be a success story about Russian hockey

⁴⁶ Montreal's *La Presse*, a newspaper written in French, published Réjean Tremblay's article revealing the ties between the Russian Mafia and Russian National Hockey League Players. The article, titled "Viacheslav Fetisov paierait pour «la protection» de sa famille," was the first article on the scandal, leading other Canadian and American newspapers to translate the news to their English-speaking readers.

⁴⁷ "Russian players pay for families' protection: Many NHL stars reportedly target of Moscow Mafia." *Rocky Mountain News* (Denver, CO), December 25, 1993.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Réjean Tremblay, "Viatcheslav Fetisov paierait pour «la protection» de sa famille," *La Presse* (Montreal, Canada), December 23, 1993. Translated by Kayla Ennion.

players who entered the NHL was now becoming a report of potential targets for the Mafia. *La Presse*, according to *Rocky Mountain News*, also explained how “the underworld controls the Russian hockey league, which receives large transfer payments in hard currency for its players who sign with clubs in the NHL or the richer western European leagues in Switzerland or Germany.”⁵⁰

An NHL spokesperson did not initially respond to the allegations. Also, the director of the Players Association did not answer the various requests for comment. However, according to Joe LaPointe in the *New York Times* article “Hockey; Russian Crime Groups Harassing Expatriates,” many were troubled by the allegations. “Officials of National Hockey League teams and players are concerned that athletes from the former Soviet Union are being targeted for extortion by Russian gangsters running protection rackets.”⁵¹ LaPointe continued to explain Mike Smith’s concern with the issue. Smith, the general manager of the Winnipeg Jets, knew of one of his drafted Russian players being “roughed up” by what he believed to be Russian gangsters.⁵² According to LaPointe, Mike Smith was also one of the National Hockey League’s experts on Russian hockey affairs.⁵³ Smith was quoted as saying, “It affects any Russian citizen who goes to the West and has hard currency. That’s how the hockey players get tied in. People know they have money.” Smith continued explaining how one player was harmed: “One of our drafted players in junior hockey was roughed up and he’s not the only one.”⁵⁴ He declined to name the players who had allegedly become victims of threats and violence.

⁵⁰ “Russian players pay for protection,” *Rocky Mountain News*, 1993.

⁵¹ Joe LaPointe. “Hockey; Russian Crime Groups Harassing Expatriates.” *New York Times*, December 24, 1993. <http://www.nytimes.com/1993/12/24/sports/hockey-russian-crime-groups-harassing-expatriates.html>. (accessed January 22, 2014).

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

Despite all the allegations and players suggested to be involved, the main character of the scandal was Slava Fetisov. *La Presse* pinpointed Fetisov as a target of the Mafia. His agent, however, denied the allegations, stating that his client had not made any payments to the Mafia. Fetisov was quoted in the *New York Times* article: “I don’t know where this came from; it’s not true. It’s wrong. There are 60 Russian players in the NHL and nobody pays. I’ve never paid anybody.”⁵⁵ Slava Fetisov continued to deny any threats and extortion allegations of the Russian Mafia on any NHL player. He also denied it when his name came up in the next few years about his friendship with a major player in the Russian Mafia.

Players Speak

Regardless of Fetisov’s denial, others continued to express their belief in the allegations. “We’re well aware of it,” said Don Maloney, the general manager of the New York Islanders. “It is not a good situation.”⁵⁶ Even players from the former Soviet Union claimed to have been victims of extortion. One may never know how many Russian NHL players were actually threatened, but a few did step forward and explain their situation. Los Angeles Kings’ defenseman Alexei Zhitnik, a Ukrainian native, described his alleged confrontation with Ukrainian criminals. As Lisa Dillman and Helene Elliott wrote in the *Los Angeles Times*, Zhitnik said the threats were “verbal, rather than physical.”⁵⁷ “I have little problem with Russian Mafia,” Zhitnik told the *Los Angeles Times*. “They say things like, ‘Blow up your car.’ And different (stuff).”⁵⁸ Alexei Zhitnik became a target of the Mafia after completing a successful rookie

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Lisa Dillman and Helene Elliott. “Kings’ Zhitnik Says He Was Threatened: NHL: He acknowledges that organized crime elements in Ukraine tried to extort money from him.” *Los Angeles Times*, December 27, 1993. http://articles.latimes.com/1993-12-27/sports/sp-5997_1_crime-group. (accessed January 22, 2014).

⁵⁸ Ibid.

National Hockey League season. He was well received by his compatriots when he returned to Ukraine during the summer of 1993. Unfortunately, this made him a target for extortion. Zhitnik continued to discuss the problems with the extortionists. “If you pay the first time, the next time you pay much more. But my friends helped me. Like the police, the cops can’t do nothing. No rules. No laws.”⁵⁹

Though other players have denied the allegations, team executives of the Los Angeles Kings took the matter seriously by asking Zhitnik not to return to Kiev during the off-season. Los Angeles Kings’ coach Barry Melrose was among the many who urged Zhitnik to stay in the United States during the summers. “Every time he goes back there,” explained Melrose, “I don’t breathe easy until he gets back. We’ve tried to get him to move over here and move his family, but it’s tough.”⁶⁰ However, his homeland was not the only place where he was at risk. Zhitnik’s social life was mentioned by a Russian mobster in the 1996 congressional hearings: “He showed up at a Russian club in Los Angeles one night with a new car, expensive clothes, and a beautiful woman. He was young and naive.”⁶¹ The gangster continued with a story about how Zhitnik got involved with a *krysha*. “A man named Sasha, whom I know is connected to a Russian organized crime group, approached Alexei and demanded money from him. Sasha was sending Alexei a warning, to make sure he thought about his future in Los Angeles. Alexei did not go to the police.”⁶² According to Robert I. Friedman in *Red Mafiya: How the Russian Mob Has Invaded America*, sources claimed Zhitnik was beaten under a pier in Los Angeles. After the alleged violence, Zhitnik went to a more powerful Russian criminal group to help protect himself from

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Senate Hearing before the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations of the committee on Governmental Affairs. *Russian Organized Crime in the United States*, 104th Cong., 2d sess., May 15, 1996, S. Hrg. 104-604, 51.

⁶² Ibid.

other gangsters. Alexei Zhitnik denied the incident, claiming the whole thing was “a stupid accident. It was my mistake. I was not kidnapped.”⁶³

One may never know what really happened to Zhitnik with the shady figures and inconsistent stories. One way for Zhitnik’s accusations of Mafia abuse to have credibility would be for another player to come forward with a similar allegation. Alexander Mogilny of the Vancouver Canucks, for instance, was another player who had a run-in with an alleged mobster. Sergey Fomitov, also known as Sergey Pavlosky, followed Mogilny to a restaurant one night after practice in March 1994. According to the *Southeast Missourian* in an article from March 27th, Mogilny explained the confrontation as fearful when the men threatened “to shoot him in the back and stab him in the legs” if they did not get the money they demanded.⁶⁴ Alexander Mogilny was surprised by the incident because he told police he knew Fomitov. When he was arrested and charged with extortion, Fomitov claimed he was asking for a loan, not demanding money. According to his attorney, Fomitov entered the United States under a fake name, Sergey Pavlosky, because he was hounded for helping Mogilny defect from the Soviet Union. Upon entering the United States, the Buffalo Sabres added Fomitov to the payroll as “Mogilny’s translator and personal representative.”⁶⁵ Steve Rossi, the Buffalo Sabres’ spokesperson, insisted it was Mogilny who wanted Fomitov added to the payroll, rather than having the money go through himself. Robert Riordan, Fomitov’s attorney, explained his client needed money, so he went to his “best friend” for some help. When Mogilny was asked by

⁶³ Robert I. Friedman, *Red Mafiya: How the Russian Mob Has Invaded America* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 2000), 178.

⁶⁴ “Arrest made in extortion of former Russian hockey player,” *Southeast Missourian*, March 27, 1994.

⁶⁵ “Accused extortionist says he was asking Mogilny for loan.” *Observer-Reporter* (Washington, PA), March 29, 1994.

investigators about this so-called friendship, he responded with, “He was just a business partner.”⁶⁶

In *The Encyclopedia of Canadian Organized Crime*, Peter Edwards and Michel Auger added, “The Mogilny case was considered by police to be an isolated incident, and not part of a larger scheme.”⁶⁷ However, Fomitov’s involvement with organized crime was apparent when he was named as having ties to a criminal organization. The United States Senate hearings on Russian organized crime briefly discussed the issues among hockey players and the Mafia. For example, an anonymous Russian criminal spoke to Chairman Roth and members of the subcommittee on May 15, 1996.⁶⁸ “Professional hockey players from the former Soviet Union are also victims of extortion. And the extortion does not just happen in Moscow or Kiev; it happens here.”⁶⁹ The Russian criminal continued to name Fomitov and his involvement, as well as other players such as Mogilny and Zhitnik. He also discussed a new victim of extortion:

I also know Vladimir Malakhov, who plays for the Montreal Canadiens, but used to be with the New York Islanders. He was approached in the National Restaurant in Brighton Beach by a man who worked for [Vyacheslav] Ivankov. The man demanded money from Malakhov. He did not have to threaten him explicitly; the message was clearly understood. Malakhov spent the next months in fear, looking over his shoulder to see if he was being followed, avoiding restaurants and clubs where Russian criminals hang out. Fortunately, the problem went away when Malakhov was traded to Montreal.⁷⁰

Regardless of the evidence and hearsay circulating in the National Hockey League and the United States Senate, Russian players continued to deny the allegations of the Russian Mafia’s targeting players.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Peter Edwards and Michel Auger. *The Encyclopedia of Canadian Organized Crime: From Captain Kid to Mom Boucher*. (Toronto, Ontario, Canada: McClelland & Stewart Ltd., 2004), 161-62.

⁶⁸ Senate Hearing. *Russian Organized Crime in the United States*, 1996.

⁶⁹ Ibid., Anonymous Russian Criminal speaking about extortion of NHL players, 51.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 52.

As the news reports on the scandal died down for the next few years, officials of the National Hockey League, as well as the FBI, kept an eye on the situation for several reasons. For one, they were aware that this type of crime was present in European leagues. Second, according to Tremblay's article in *La Presse*, the Russian Mafia leaders who control the Russian leagues had a strong grip on all channels associated with the sport.⁷¹ This hold certainly involved players who left Russia and other eastern European countries for the National Hockey League. And finally, a few of the most popular Russian players in the NHL had friendly and business relationships with men the FBI considered to be leaders in the Russian Mafia.

Friendly with the Russian Mafia

The news about extortion of the Russian National Hockey League players kept reporters and sportswriters busy for a couple of months from 1993 through 1994. Whether the extortion attempts were confirmed or quickly denied by other Russian players, the idea of criminal activity between athletes and mobsters was not farfetched. Evidently, there were high-profile Russian hockey players who were not shy about their friendly relationships with Russian criminals. Vyacheslav Sliva, for example, was named by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and the FBI as a Russian businessman who had connections with top Russian criminals in Moscow and the United States.⁷² The authorities kept a close watch on the mystery Russian when Sliva entered Toronto in the mid-nineties. Sergeant Reg King of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police went undercover to keep an eye on Sliva and his activities. According to *Frontline's* documentary "Mafia Power Play," wiretaps brought forth an old scandal linked to the hockey world. "He

⁷¹ Tremblay, "Viatcheslav Fetisov paierait pour «la protection» de sa famille." *La Presse*.

⁷² *Frontline*, "Mafia Power Play."

would brag about his relationships with certain NHL hockey players,” said Sergeant King.⁷³ Within the wiretaps, the police found Sliva speaking of Valeri Kamensky, an NHL superstar, quite often.

Valeri Kamensky was a member of the Quebec Nordiques for several seasons during the 1990s. As a talented hockey player with a valuable contract, Kamensky drew the interest of different Russian characters, including criminals. According to *Frontline*, there was evidence found in Canadian government files showing Kamensky as having played a key role in getting Vyacheslav Sliva into Canada. The Quebec Nordiques also had a hand in his entrance into Canada by officially requesting a visa for Sliva.⁷⁴ Though there was evidence of a friendly relationship between the two men, there was no indication whether it was a criminal relationship. However, it was found in Sliva’s wiretaps that there were calls made to a man the police believed to be the “godfather” of the Russian Mafia in the United States.

Vyacheslav Ivankov achieved the so-called “American Dream” by entering the United States and creating his own company in Brighton Beach. He became a successful businessman and earned a substantial amount of money. Ivankov also gained the attention of the FBI. His business, Slavic, Inc. was to the naked eye a trading company, but after further monitoring by the FBI, it turned out to be a protection racket. Slavic, Inc. was also believed to be involved with narcotics. “In June, 1995, fearing that a murder in Russia would lead to a cover-up, the FBI arrested Ivankov on extortion charges that would eventually lead to a 10-year sentence in federal prison.”⁷⁵ The FBI searched the company, looking for incriminating evidence to take down other potential criminals in the United States. Investigators made a shocking discovery when they

⁷³ Ibid., Sergeant Reg King on Vyacheslav Sliva

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid., Linden MacIntyre on Vyacheslav Ivankov.

came across paperwork with Vyacheslav Fetisov's name. "The FBI learned that the president of Slavic, Inc. was none other than Slava Fetisov, the man who'd helped lead Detroit to the Stanley Cup and who'd taken the cup to Moscow."⁷⁶

The media shifted their attention back to old stories with the startling news of yet another connection between Russian hockey players and the Russian Mafia. Linden MacIntyre was able to sit down with Fetisov for the 1999 *Frontline* documentary and ask about his involvement with Slavic, Inc. Fetisov defended his relationship in this uncomfortable interview: "The Russian who make business, somehow it's a criminal, right? Or every Russian who in a government position criminal, also. I think it's wrong. Big-time. Big-time."⁷⁷ MacIntyre quickly responded with questions relating to Fetisov's title in the company, including his understanding of what Slavic, Inc. did as a business. With a quick answer, Fetisov said, "It was trading."⁷⁸ The FBI's understanding of the business, however, was that it got criminals from Russia into the United States with "L" visas, also known as business visas. This practice would ensure that they could come and go as they pleased for up to seven years. "In fact," said Jim Moody of the FBI, "there were flyers on the street in Moscow offering the service for, like, \$5,000. And that's part of what Slavic, Inc. was set up for."⁷⁹ As the interview continued between Linden MacIntyre and Slava Fetisov, the topic of Ivankov's involvement in the company got heated. "Vyacheslav Ivankov is in jail now. What's your reaction to that situation?" asked MacIntyre.⁸⁰ Surprisingly, Fetisov denied any connection of Ivankov to the company. The evidence, however, said otherwise.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid, Slava Fetisov interviewed by Linden MacIntyre.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid., former head of the FBI Organized Crime Unit Jim Moody on Slavic, Inc.

⁸⁰ Ibid., Linden MacIntyre asking Fetisov about Ivankov.

Vyacheslav Ivankov ran the company and was arrested for the criminal activities that were connected with Slavic, Inc.; Slava Fetisov was named president of Slavic, Inc.

The connection between Fetisov and Slavic, Inc. was highlighted in *Details* magazine in 1998. This particular article, written by Robert I. Friedman, sparked a controversial reaction by Russian hockey players, and the National Hockey League especially. The article was seen as a wake-up call for the NHL, pointing out scandalous connections between their players and criminals. The National Hockey League defended its reputation and players with a statement to *Details* and Robert I. Friedman by attorney Michael A. Cardozo:

The NHL has an exemplary record of integrity of the outcome of its games. When charges are raised that organized crime has infiltrated the League that are promptly and appropriately investigated, as they were here. The allegations of your article are false, as the FBI has confirmed. Your article is clearly written with malice in an effort to damage the League's well-deserved reputation. Please be advised that we demand a prompt retraction of the allegations in your article. Absent such a retraction we reserve our client's rights to recover appropriate damages from you.⁸¹

Threatening a lawsuit towards *Details* and Friedman was not entirely based on the Mafia allegations. The National Hockey League felt as if its integrity had been attacked. The article made accusations of "fixed" games or intentions to alter the games by the players who had connections with criminals.⁸² To be clear, there is no evidence of games that were fixed in the National Hockey League. However, games had been altered in European and Russian leagues. Because of this, the NHL knew what to look for if there were to be any attempts to fix a game. Regardless of the idea of cheating or throwing a game for gambling purposes, the integrity of the game was questioned, causing the NHL to threaten a lawsuit.

⁸¹ Letter from Proskauer Rose LLP, representing the National Hockey League, to *Details* Magazine. April 21, 1998. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/hockey/details/letter.html>.

⁸² Ibid.

The threat made by the NHL was not the only troubling issue facing Robert I. Friedman. As an investigative journalist, Friedman faced harsh criticism of his reports by not only the National Hockey League but now by the Russian Mafia as well. According to FBI agent Michael McCall in a *New York Times* article from 1999, the FBI had reason to believe that Friedman's life had been threatened. "The information is that a Russian organized crime figure has ordered, has taken out a contract on your life," Mr. McCall told Friedman over the telephone.⁸³ The warning was not the first Friedman received, unfortunately. In May of 1998, Friedman received a Valentine's Day card written by a convicted Russian mobster from an upstate New York federal prison. "It was easy finding a Valentine for someone like you," was printed on the front of the card.⁸⁴ Inside the card, however, a handwritten threat laced with obscenities was signed by Vyacheslav Ivankov. The FBI took these threats seriously because "sixteen journalists have been killed in countries from the former Soviet Union since 1993 in circumstances that strongly suggest the involvement of Russian organized crime, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists."⁸⁵ Needless to say, the threat to someone's life is a serious matter. Whether his investigation of Mafia involvement in the National Hockey League and its players was credible or not, the idea of his life being in danger and the FBI's finding this worrisome made the original accusations hard to ignore.

Vyacheslav Fetisov was not the only player mentioned in Friedman's article. Pavel Bure, a talented young Russian hockey player, was also linked to the Russian Mafia on a friendlier basis. Described by David J. Neal, a sports writer for the *Miami Herald*, Pavel Bure was a

⁸³ Blaine Harden. "Threatened by Russian Mob, Journalist Pushes Back." *New York Times*, March 5, 1999. <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/03/05/nyregion/threatened-by-russian-mob-journalist-pushes-back.html>. (accessed February 19, 2014).

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

“mystery wrapped in a riddle surrounded by an enigma.”⁸⁶ As a member of the Florida Panthers, Bure raised many questions about his personal life, especially with the rumors connecting him to Russian criminals. Bure remained under the media radar for a couple of years despite the fact that his name was indirectly connected to the 1993–94 accusations of extortion. However, with Friedman’s article emerging in 1998 and new investigations launched on the Mafia, Bure was once again brought into the old conversation.

Pavel Bure’s friendly association with the Mafia went further than any other Russian player who allegedly had relationships with criminals. He enjoyed his celebrity status in Russia, as the country’s “Michael Jordan of hockey” who led the Russian national team. When he visited Russia, he frequented the popular and expensive night clubs, socializing with other high-profile Russians, including Anzor Kikalishvili. According to Linden MacIntyre of *Frontline*, Kikalishvili was a public figure, yet his business was a mystery. “Kikalishvili is much more than a successful businessman. Among other assets, he has his own political party and clearly aspires to political power, perhaps even presidency.”⁸⁷ Pavel Bure was very outspoken about Kikalishvili in his interview with *Frontline*. “Yeah, he is my friend, and I really like him as a man,” said Bure to MacIntyre. “I think he helps people a lot. You know, I have seen how many times he helped poor people and singers and actors.”⁸⁸ Although Bure painted Kikalishvili as a charitable man, the FBI said otherwise. “Back in the United States, a lot of people, including former FBI agent Bob Levinson, think that Anzor Kikalishvili got where he is by becoming one of Russia’s top crime bosses,” explained Linden MacIntyre.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ David J. Neal. “Newest Cat has mysterious side.” *Miami Herald*, January 19, 1999.

⁸⁷ *Frontline*, “Mafia Power Play.”

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, Pavel Bure on Anzor Kikalishvili.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, Linden MacIntyre on Kikalishvili.

According to Levinson, he was seen frequenting a gentleman's bar in Miami with several Russian mobsters.⁹⁰ The surveillance of Kikalishvili stretched as far as Puerto Rico, where a conclave of questionable Russians met to discuss illegal activities on an international basis. When asked about the meeting and its relevance to the Russian Mafia, former head of the FBI Organized Crime Unit Jim Moody simply said, "It's almost like going back to [Apalachin] in 1957."⁹¹ The Apalachin Meeting of 1957 consisted of several high-profile members of the Italian American Mafia, who met at the home of Joseph Barbara in Apalachin, New York, to discuss their domestic and global organization. This meeting led to the realization that the Italian American Mafia existed.⁹²

The evidence against Anzor Kikalishvili was extensive enough to get him deported, banning him from re-entering the United States. Unfortunately, the problems did not end with his banishment. Evidence resurfaced concerning Pavel Bure's association with the Russian Mafia with a reminder of Kikalishvili's involvement with the gangland assassination of Otari Kvantrishvili. "Law enforcement officials say Kvantrishvili had turned his company into a vast criminal enterprise," explained MacIntyre. "It was called 21st Century Association. With his death, a lot of people wondered who could possibly fill his shoes."⁹³ Very little time passed before Anzor Kikalishvili took over 21st Century Association. Despite the horrific connection of Kikalishvili's having something to do with the assassination of Kvantrishvili, he continued to enjoy a high-profile status in Moscow. When the *Frontline* episode "Mafia Power Play" aired in 1999, Anzor Kikalishvili was still a celebrity in his own way. He was a political contender,

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid., Jim Moody on the Puerto Rico meeting.

⁹² Selwyn Rabb. *Five Families: The Rise, Decline, and Resurgence of America's Most Powerful Mafia Empires*. (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, St. Martin's Press, 2005), 117-124.

⁹³ Ibid., Linden MacIntyre.

benefactor of struggling artists and athletes, and friendly with other celebrities, including Pavel Bure.

FBI agent Bob Levinson continued to find it hard to believe how someone like Pavel Bure could associate himself with a man like Kikalishvili, who was still seen as a criminal. “Pavel Bure says he’s checked out his friend through the Russian government and found no reason to avoid him,” said Linden MacIntyre. “They’ve not only remained close, but Bure is also said to have taken a top position in his friend’s company.”⁹⁴ During the *Frontline* interview, Linden asked Bure about his involvement in 21st Century Association. “There is no position at all,” argued Bure. “And I think I said this to everybody, like, two or three years ago. I said I’m going to play hockey for now, and that’s what I’ve been doing.”⁹⁵ Although he denied his position with 21st Century Association in Miami, he was often seen around Moscow on billboards saying, “The future belongs to 21st Century Association.”⁹⁶ There is no denying his involvement with 21st Century Association when his face was next to the company’s name.

Conclusion

The years after the fall of the Soviet Union were a time of disarray. The 1990s brought an era of reconstruction for the Russian government and economy. This decade left Russia vulnerable to corruption on multiple levels, including the sports leagues. The influence of Russian hockey not only resulted in the National Hockey League’s going after the best former-Soviet players, it also led to a problem the NHL did not wish upon itself. The North American media rode the wave of Réjean Tremblay’s article reporting on the NHL Russian players who

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid, Pavel Bure.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

may have paid the Russian Mafia for protection. Although some Russian players denied Tremblay's accusations, others stepped forward and discussed their relationship with Russian organized crime. In 1996, the United States Senate hearings on Russian organized crime briefly discussed the issue, including firsthand accounts by criminals themselves. In the late 1990s, the denial of Russian superstars like Pavel Bure and Slava Fetisov continued, featured in *Frontline's* "Mafia Power Play." In an article from the *Moscow Times* in May of 1998, Pavel Bure slammed the North American media for accusing him of having a close relationship with a man the FBI considered to be a top Mafia boss. "It's very easy for people to print all sorts of totally unfounded rumors about myself, but it's very difficult for me or for anyone else for that matter, trying to clear your name after such false information," Bure told Gennady Fyodorov of the *Moscow Times*. "It's like trying to wash yourself off from all this dirt."⁹⁷

The hockey player was not the only one who responded harshly to the reports of Mafia connections. A few years before Pavel Bure ranted about the American media to the *Moscow Times*, his friend Anzor Kikalishvili blasted the United States for the FBI's labeling him as a top Mafia leader. Comparing himself to Frank Sinatra, Kikalishvili expressed his outrage that the FBI was accusing him of being part of the Russian Mafia because he was a successful businessman from Moscow who had many famous friends. After he was banned from the United States in 1995, Kikalishvili wrote an open letter to President Bill Clinton, claiming he was trying to "increase tensions between the two great nations."⁹⁸

With the back-and-forth between the media and the players and Mafia, the real concern was within the National Hockey League. Why did the NHL stand by and do nothing about the

⁹⁷ Gennady Fyodorov. "Hockey Star Denies Mafia Links." *Moscow Times*, May 1, 1998.
<http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/hockey-star-denies-mafia-links/291235.html>.

⁹⁸ Ibid., "'Godfather' of Sports Denies Link to Mafia." *Moscow Times*. November 19, 1996.
<http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/godfather-of-sports-denies-like-to-mafia/315956.html>.

issue? The league, although aware of the allegations, did not hand out any punishments or warnings concerning the problem with the Russian Mafia and the players. Looking back at other sports scandals, including the Black Sox of 1919, boxing and the Italian American Mafia, and other issues, the National Hockey League arguably did nothing about what some may consider a serious problem. The next chapter will discuss the NHL's reaction compared to other major sports scandals, including reasons why the league did not hand out any sanctions. Also, the next chapter discusses the "Morality Clause" within the National Hockey League contracts for its players.

CHAPTER THREE

NO HARM, NO FOUL—THE NATIONAL HOCKEY LEAGUE’S RESPONSE TO THE RUSSIAN MAFIA ALLEGATIONS

When the allegations of Russian Mafia involvement with Russian hockey players circulated, the media waited for a response by the National Hockey League. Though the League cooperated with the local police and eventually the FBI, there was nothing done further towards the individual players who had friendly relationships with Mafia members. This chapter will focus on the National Hockey League’s stance in the issue. Examples of sports controversies that occurred in other professional leagues will be discussed and compared to this particular scandal. Also, the integrity of the game and League remains an important issue on this situation. The NHL did not react because they found no evidence indicating games being harmed, fixed, or manipulated by the Russian players and the Mafia.

Although the National Hockey League did their own investigation on their games and players, the dangerous circumstances in Russian hockey leagues remained. For instance, the president of the Russian Ice Hockey Federation was assassinated in 1997. This troubling fact did not make the National Hockey League flinch, however the Russian players were reminded of the realities in their homeland. Perhaps the NHL did not want to overstep their boundaries because of the Mafia hold over the Russian hockey leagues. The National Hockey League’s position in the situation was made clear when *Frontline’s* Linden MacIntyre interviewed the Chief Legal Counsel of the NHL. The interview proved League was more concerned with the image of the game, rather than the integrity and principles of the organization itself.

Controversies and Commissioners

Professional sports leagues in North America have seen many controversies and scandals over the years. Today, it seems rare to open a newspaper or turn on the news without reading about a controversy surrounding professional sports. Minor offenses, ranging from DUIs to bar fights, are often reported by sports journalists in either local or national news outlets. These issues are often brushed aside and forgotten—and sometimes forgiven—as time goes on.

Major offenses, however, can be more difficult to forgive and forget. Janine Young Kim and Matthew J. Parlow, two professors of law from Marquette University Law School, noted that some studies have suggested that professional athletes are especially prone to criminal behavior. “Others,” explained Kim and Parlow, “have countered that this is merely a perception created by greater media scrutiny of professional athletes.”⁹⁹ Regardless of which individual or team is involved in the controversy, the media and general public expect a response by the league. In Kim and Parlow’s 2009 article, “Off-Court Misbehavior: Sports Leagues and Private Punishment” from the *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, the highlighted stances of the commissioners and leagues show them having a tendency to impose harsh penalties. In essence, the article discussed the powers of the commissioners to enforce punishments for on- and off-the-court misbehavior. “These general powers include the authority to punish athletes for criminal acts committed outside the scope of play.”¹⁰⁰ The key word is “committed.” Athletes who commit any criminal acts are deemed vulnerable to punishment by the professional league. “In particular,” continued Kim and Parlow, “constitutions, bylaws, and collective bargaining

⁹⁹ Janine Young Kim and Matthew J. Parlow, “Off-Court Misbehavior: Sport Leagues and Private Punishment,” *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, Vol. 99, No. 3 (Spring 2009): 573-4.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 575.

agreements of the major sports leagues contain provisions granting commissioners the authority to discipline players for acts deemed not in the ‘best interest’ of the sport.”¹⁰¹

One of the first major scandals to hit professional sports was the “Chicago Black Sox” scandal in 1919. After that year’s World Series, investigators determined that the series was fixed by eight players on the Chicago White Sox team. The scandal brought about new responsibilities within Major League Baseball, including the creation of the position of commissioner. In 1920 Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis became the first commissioner of Major League Baseball, with various powers, including “to impose punishment and pursue legal remedies for any conduct . . . that [the Commissioner] determined to be detrimental to the best interests of the game.”¹⁰²

Following Major League Baseball’s example, other professional sports eventually created a position with similar responsibilities to uphold their leagues’ constitutions and bylaws.¹⁰³ Major League Baseball’s first commissioner was put into office in 1920; other professional sports leagues moved much later. The National Hockey League, for example, did not have a commissioner position until 1993 although the NHL did have a president from the beginning. As the NHL’s first and only commissioner, Gary Bettman’s responsibilities mirror the duties of the commissioners of Major League Baseball, the National Football League, the National Basketball Association, and other leagues—minor, professional, and amateur.

However, the commissioners and the presidents of the sports leagues, no matter how powerful, are often at the mercy of the owners, which can lead to power struggles and major issues. In essence, commissioners are not necessarily liked by players, coaches, owners, or fans

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 575.

¹⁰² Ibid., 576.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 576

because of their disciplinary responsibilities. If this is the case, what happens when a commissioner such as Gary Bettman ignores an issue altogether, including certain relationships between players and criminals?

It was evident, whether by word of mouth or by the U.S. Senate hearings in 1996, that Russian National Hockey League players were associated with the Russian Mafia. Not only were players being threatened by Russian gangsters, but journalists such as Robert I. Friedman were receiving threatening Valentine's Day cards from convicted Russian mobster Vyacheslav Ivankov. Pavel Bure and his friendship with Anzor Kikalishvili made headlines when PBS's *Frontline* broadcasted an investigation focused on the perplexing relationship between former Soviet hockey players and the crime syndicate. The obvious concern of not only the media but also the FBI left many baffled. Why did the National Hockey League stand by and express little concern about the questionable relationships between its players and men the FBI considered to be Russian mobsters? Concerning the so-called "best interest of the league," did Gary Bettman find the evidence of the associations between his players and the Russian Mafia insignificant altogether? The National Hockey League's stance in the situation may be understood by looking at previous sports scandals, both large scale and individual, that have concluded with harsh punishments by the commissioners.

Not All Fun and Games With the Mafia

The concern of the best interest of the league can be narrowed down to one word: integrity. It is difficult to come back from any scandal when the game and league's integrity is harmed. There are several incidences of misconduct in sports, particularly those affecting game outcomes. However, for the purposes of this research, examples of organized crime involvement with sports is important to revisit.

As noted previously, one of the earliest examples of sports scandals in professional American leagues that brought the integrity of the professional athletes into question was the Chicago White Sox's fixing of the 1919 World Series. Gambling and betting on sporting events was not necessarily illegal. However, major problems ensued when eight players on the White Sox team decided to throw the series after being paid by gamblers to lose. According to Stanley H. Teitelbaum in his book *Sports Heroes, Fallen Idols*, suspicions of the White Sox having thrown the series engulfed the sports world. "The White Sox were the stronger team on paper and were heavy favorites to win the series, but before the opening game in Cincinnati the odds had shifted drastically in favor of the Reds. It was likely that word had gotten around to the bookmakers that a fix was in the works."¹⁰⁴

A year after the Cincinnati Reds took the title of World Champions, the rumors of the fix became reality, shocking baseball and sports fans alike. The complete story was unclear. After investigations and a trial through the summer of 1921, the eight Chicago players were found not guilty on all charges. Teitelbaum characterized the court proceedings as weak, with but a short deliberation among the jurors. "Later that night," explained Teitelbaum, "the jurors and the players happened to celebrate at the same restaurant and wound up partying together. In the festive atmosphere of exoneration, the players and the jurors left the restaurant together, happily chanting 'Hail, hail, the gang's all here.'"¹⁰⁵ Despite the exoneration, Commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis banned all eight players for life.

As years passed, the story of the "Black Sox" grew with new angles, including one involving a notorious gangster. Arnold Rothstein, a well-known New York gambler, racketeer, and leader of the Jewish American criminal syndicate, was linked to the conspiring and funding

¹⁰⁴ Stanley H. Teitelbaum, *Sports Heroes, Fallen Idols* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 33.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 38.

of the fix. In essence, he was considered to be the mastermind of the Black Sox scandal. During the trial, however, his name was cleared in court.¹⁰⁶

In the early- to mid-twentieth century, one sport in particular, boxing, dominated the airwaves and newspapers. The years between the Depression and the early 1950s were known as the sport's "Golden Age." Boxing was not only an entertaining sport to view and bet on, but it offered a potentially lucrative career to an amateur athlete. The sport was also quite appealing to the Italian American Mafia of the New York underworld for several reasons. According to Steven A. Riess in his 1988 essay "Only the Ring Was Square," in the early Golden Age of boxing, professional gamblers and bootleggers managed their own boxers as a hobby.¹⁰⁷ During this era, boxing was also a financial juggernaut. One man in particular, Frankie Carbo, was in the business to have complete control of the sport. Fixing a match was simple—only two fighters are in the match, rather than an entire roster of athletes. Frankie Carbo's and the Mafia's influence in boxing during the 1950s was especially pervasive because they controlled boxing's major promotional outfit, the International Boxing Club.¹⁰⁸ Helping their takeover, there was no commissioner or central governing body in boxing at that time, allowing easy infiltration by the Mafia.

Gangsters were becoming powerful individuals during this time. "Once boxing was legalized in the 1920s," explained Riess, "ruthless gangsters who had become more powerful than their political allies supplanted politicians as the dominate force in the sport, easily circumventing the inadequate if not corrupt state athletic commissions that had been established

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 40.

¹⁰⁷ Steven A. Riess. "Only the Ring was Square: Frankie Carbo and the Underworld Control of American Boxing," *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (1988): 49.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 41.

to police the sport.”¹⁰⁹ This grasp of the Mafia on boxing, from nearly every angle, sounds much like the Russian Mafia’s control of the hockey leagues in the former Soviet republics during the 1990s. Like boxing, games in Russia were being fixed in various ways. For example, a player who was paid off or threatened by the Mafia could give a lackluster performance. He could put himself in the penalty box for half the game. “As a result,” explained Robert I. Friedman in *Red Mafiya*, “federal authorities have come to fear that the NHL is now so compromised by Russian gangsters that the integrity of the game itself may be in jeopardy and the most dreaded word in sports might possibly infect professional hockey: ‘fix.’”¹¹⁰

The Italian American Mafia’s influence on boxing and the Russian Mafia’s control on hockey in the Russian federation sound similar. For example, “owning or controlling a prize fight champion also added to one’s standing in the social milieu of the underworld.”¹¹¹ This particular feeling of a gangster may have been felt by the Russian Mafia and their relationships with certain NHL players. Though the players and Russian gangsters might not admit to their personal and business relationships in the United States and Canada, they did show their connections in motherland Russia. The Pavel Bure and Anzor Kikalishvili relationship, for example, is not completely understood in North America. Nevertheless, there are billboards of Pavel Bure in Moscow representing Kikalishvili’s company, 21st Century Association, despite Bure’s denial of having any association with the company.

However, one important difference between the two criminal associations was the response by the authorities. Frankie Carbo’s and the Mafia’s downfall in boxing began in 1958

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 48.

¹¹⁰ Friedman, *Red Mafiya*, 197.

¹¹¹ Riess, “Only the Ring Was Square,” 32.

when Carbo was caught working as an undercover manager.¹¹² The U.S. Senate did an investigation on boxing, uncovering Carbo's substantial involvement in the corrupt sport. After a three-month trial, Frankie Carbo and other Mafia members were convicted and sentenced for their involvement in the corruption. As for the Russian Mafia and the hockey corruption in the motherland, this dangerous game has yet come to an end.

The Black Sox of 1919 and boxing's corruption are two examples of American sports scandals that received attention. Though they are extreme circumstances, like gambling, fixing, and throwing games, the question is why the National Hockey League did nothing about the Mafia's influence over Russian players. The White Sox players and professional boxers were involved with corrupt figures, including Jewish American and Italian American Mafias. With that said, should the Russian hockey players have been warned, or even protected by the National Hockey League?

Despite the evidence showing players such as Pavel Bure and Slava Fetisov having relationships with Russian mob leaders, there was no evidence of games having been fixed or thrown. As mentioned earlier, games in Russia were evidently being controlled by the Russian Mafia. The National Hockey League knew about this and could determine whether games were being thrown in the NHL. Since they found no evidence of games being affected, the NHL did not take action. There are specific clues the league can look for in a game that would indicate cheating or fixing. Generally, the game of hockey could be difficult for a player or two to throw because of the fast pace and unpredictability of the game.

However, the off-ice actions of the Russian players remained the focus of the media. According to William Daly, the Chief Legal Counsel of the NHL, the FBI and the League

¹¹² Ibid., 46-7.

remained in contact over the relationships between the Russian Mafia and certain players.¹¹³ Regardless, the League should have referred to morality of the players, and how it could affect the League's image. Although the League cannot monitor everything their players do off the ice, there are certified agents of the players who have multiple duties, including public image.¹¹⁴ In fact, there is a clause in the standard player's contract about the player's conduct off the ice. In section two of the player's contract, the player agrees upon signing, to "conduct himself on and off the rink according to the highest standards of honesty, morality, fair play and sportsmanship, and to refrain from conduct detrimental to the best interest of the Club, the League, or professional hockey generally."¹¹⁵

Guilt by Association?

The morality of players can be questioned when they commit wrongdoing outside the competitive sports arena. If an athlete breaks the law, the club and league decide whether they should punish the player with a fine, suspension, or, in rare occasions, expulsion. As already mentioned, there is usually a section in a player's contract with the club and league expressing the responsibility of the athlete's actions off the field, court, or ice. This particular clause is standard. A club's owner can certainly implement additional rules related to the "best interest" clause. The implication of this clause is not only for the best interest of the league or club but also for the player. For instance, the professional athlete acts as a role model for younger athletes in terms of sportsmanship, fairness, and morality both within and outside of the game. Foreign

¹¹³ *Frontline*, "Mafia Power Play."

¹¹⁴ The National Hockey League Player's Association offers certified player agents who "demonstrate their ability to provide appropriate representation." The agents are responsible for contract negotiations, endorsement deals, public relations, and the overall image of the athlete both on and off the ice. For more information on the NHLPA and their certified agents, visit <http://www.nhlpa.com>.

¹¹⁵ Joseph M. Weiler. "Legal Analysis of the NHL Player's Contract," *Marquette Sports Law Review*, Vol 3., No. 1 (Fall 1992): 80.

athletes, too, are responsible for the image of their country and the nation in which they play. If they break the rules or the law, proper punishment will be served. The question is, how far does it have to go before the league steps in and expresses concern or administers consequences?

Several athletes past and present have put themselves in situations that may have been detrimental to their employer's image. One type of situation in particular is associating with the wrong people. Some players have been cautious of who they surround themselves with, while others fall too deep into trouble because of bad influences. Pavel Bure, Slava Fetisov, and other Russian NHL players are examples of athletes associating with the wrong people, but they have been able to avoid getting into trouble. Regardless, it could be argued that the National Hockey League should monitor the relationships more closely to avoid a potentially tragic mistake. Association with criminals or questionable characters can be disastrous for not only the player, but for the league as well.

One particular hockey scandal comes to mind when discussing how far it can go and how dangerous it can be without the NHL's taking notice. In 2004, Mike Danton of the St. Louis Blues played in his first playoffs in his professional career. Normally, professional athletes remain focused on their game, especially during the playoffs. However, this was not the case for Mike Danton. On April 16, 2004, Danton was arrested and found guilty of conspiring to hire a hit man to kill his agent David Frost. The National Hockey League took this matter seriously and banned Mike Danton for life. Despite the banning of Danton, there was more to the story that the NHL missed entirely.

The two men had a toxic relationship that remains confusing to the National Hockey League and the general public. Danton looked up to Frost, even claiming him and his wife as his surrogate parents. But the relationship was actually more disturbing. David Frost had a history

with minor and junior leagues as an aggressive coach who enjoyed a closeness among his players—closer than most coach–player relationships. In a *Sports Illustrated* article from 2011, the details of David Frost’s unusual coaching methods and relationship with Danton were discussed. “Apart from maintaining what some felt was an inappropriate closeness with Mike [Danton], Frost was accused of hosting alcohol-fueled sex parties at a motel in Deseronto, Ontario.”¹¹⁶ Frost would host the parties for his star players, including a young Mike Danton, and allegedly “encouraged, and then watched, sexual acts between his players and girls under the age of 17.”¹¹⁷ On top of the “sex parties” allegations, Frost had a history of hitting his own players and minor league officials when agitated. Despite Frost’s history, the National Hockey League Player’s Association certified him as a player’s agent.

This tragic story of the player–agent relationship provides an example of a professional athlete who surrounded himself with troubled people. As a young boy, Danton trusted David Frost, submitted to his authority and advice to leave his family behind, and ultimately paid the price of falling under the influence of a disturbed person. According to Danton’s mother, Frost had Mike under a spell. She later told the Toronto’s *Globe and Mail* that Frost “stole Michael from us, [and has taken] Michael’s mind from him.”¹¹⁸ Regardless of this particular athlete’s story, the question of whether a professional sports league should do anything about the player’s actions and associations outside the game is still up for debate.

The Mike Danton and David Frost story came about shortly after the Russian Mafia–player relationship allegations. Under any circumstances, the relationships between professional athletes and alleged criminals should be taken seriously, whether the relationship had been

¹¹⁶ L. Jon Wertheim, “I’m Glad I Went to Prison,” In *Sports Illustrated*, February 28, 2011.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

preventable or not. Certainly, an employer cannot control the personal lives of its employees. However, when it comes to professional athletes, employers should monitor the players' outside relationships and actions, especially when their associates are considered criminals. Mike Danton and the NHL put themselves into dire situations when Danton surrounded himself with people who could cause trouble to his, and eventually the NHL's, image. The NHL, for example, knew of David Frost's past antics that had landed him in trouble. Regardless, he became a certified NHLPA player's agent. Perhaps further monitoring of the Danton–Frost relationship by the National Hockey League could have prevented the murder-for-hire plot. Despite what could have happened, there lies an important question: would more have been done if the situation involved a star player?

The commissioner's responsibilities include taking notice of issues that may harm the best interest of the league, whether the wrongdoings are done by star athletes or the backup squad. Many cases throughout the twentieth century in different leagues have tarnished or disrupted the image of American sports. One issue in particular in the National Football League involved a talented and popular quarterback. Gambling was an issue among owners throughout the league, which was seemingly ignored by Commissioner Pete Rozelle. As mentioned before, the commissioners and presidents of the leagues served at the will of the owners. However, Commissioner Rozelle stepped in when players were involved with gamblers. One example in particular involved famed NFL stars Paul Hornung of Green Bay and Alex Karras of Detroit. Both players were suspended by Commissioner Rozelle for betting on games in the early 1960s. According to a *Sports Illustrated* article from 1963, "Hornung gambled on football games, including some in which he played as a star halfback for the Packers."¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ John Underwood, "The True Crisis," In *Sports Illustrated*, May 20, 1963.

Despite Hornung's popularity, Commissioner Rozelle punished him, making an example of a popular player with appropriate consequences. Regardless of the wrongdoings, John Underwood of *Sports Illustrated* praised Paul Hornung for his humility in the situation. Unlike Alex Karras, who claimed he was blindsided by the accusations, Hornung took responsibility for his crimes. "Paul Hornung was quick to realize his error," said Underwood. "[He] admits he is not sure of all the implications of the rule he violated, and he does not consider his action 'immoral,' but he knows for sure his conduct 'wasn't kosher.'"¹²⁰ According to the *SI* article "The True Crisis," fans forgave Hornung and embraced his honesty and the fact that he would serve his sentence with no questions asked. His successful football career and reputation allowed fans to forgive and forget. Although Karras did not take much responsibility for his actions, he was eventually forgiven by fans and the NFL because he later worked for ABC's *Monday Night Football* for three seasons.¹²¹

Athletes who commit crimes against the league or outside the game itself send the media into a frenzy. The Paul Hornung and Mike Danton stories prove that trouble can find athletes in any circumstance, whether they are popular or not. But it is important to remember that the crime does not happen all at once. There are several factors, particularly in these cases, to be considered when a crime is committed. One factor would be whom the person associates with. Perhaps in these two examples the leagues should have monitored the athletes' actions before the crimes occurred. Their relationships with gamblers or a troubled agent, for example, may have tipped off the league. In the case of the Russian NHL players and their association with the Russian Mafia, would the NHL react only if the player committed a crime?

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Bruce Weber. "Alex Karras, All-Pro NFL Lineman Who Also Starred as an Actor, Dies at 77," *New York Times*, October 10, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/11/sports/football/alex-karras-nfl-lineman-and-actor-dies-at-77.html?pagewanted=all& r=0>. (Accessed, October 12, 2014).

Pavel Bure and Slava Fetisov were stars in their own right. Bure himself was the most talked-about hockey player because of his holdout with the Vancouver Canucks and trade to the Florida Panthers. His personal life was also a hot topic—whom he was dating, his business ventures, and the Mafia connections. One would assume, looking back at the incidents of individual athletes and their personal associations, that the NHL would have done something about the friendship between Bure and Kikalishvili, a man who was no longer allowed to enter the United States. The people that Pavel Bure, Slava Fetisov, and other players associated with were dangerous men. Though these particular players did not commit any obvious crimes, how far does an association need to go before the NHL reacts? The trouble in Russia hockey leagues continued with deadly consequences. The National Hockey League knew of the problems in Russia, yet did not do more towards the alleged friendships.

Trouble in Russia

Russia continued to struggle with organized crime throughout the 1990s. The hockey leagues in particular were taken over by gangsters. Valentin Sych, the president of the Russian Ice Hockey Federation, was unhappy about the criminal problem within his league. According to Robert I. Friedman in *Red Mafiya*, Sych crusaded against the criminal element in the league. Sych spoke out against the officials of the league, saying they are the “biggest thieves. All they’re concerned with is lining their own pockets. Our hockey is now so corrupt that I don’t see how we can ever clean it up.”¹²² Sych’s concern about the Mafia would soon find him in an unfortunate situation.

¹²² Friedman, *Red Mafiya*, 201.

On April 22, 1997, Valentin Sych was gunned down in a “spray of automatic gunfire from a van parked near his country home” in an apparent contract killing.¹²³ This particular murder was a shocking reminder to the United States and the NHL of crime in Russian sports. According to Clara Germani in the *Baltimore Sun* article, “[the Russian] police, who rarely solve any of Moscow’s annual 250-plus contract murders, said they had no immediate clue to the motive for the slaying of Sych.”¹²⁴ Unfortunately for the Russian police, the sports world was coming up with its own conclusions, which were probably not too far off. Sych’s public stance against the Russian Mafia and corrupt hockey officials may well have sparked the assassination.

Former Soviet Union hockey players, however, were not surprised by the murder. “It’s terrible,” said Oleg Tverdovsky of the Phoenix Coyotes to the *Los Angeles Times*. “Anything can happen now [in Russia].”¹²⁵ It was clear the Russian expatriates knew there was trouble in their homeland. The year before, for instance, three men associated with the Central Red Army team were murdered in gang-style killings.¹²⁶ Valentin Sych, however, was a powerful and influential man in Russian hockey leagues. His outspoken stance against the Russian Mafia may have caused his murder, but it was not the only angle to his assassination. Sych was a former KGB agent who had enemies both within and outside the hockey community.¹²⁷ For this reason, the motive for the killing was unclear to Russian authorities. Vladimir Vassin, the deputy chairman of the Russian Olympic Committee, explained that Sych was a tough man. “It is possible that

¹²³ Clara Germani, “Russian Sports Official is Slain in Apparent Contract Shooting,” *The Baltimore Sun*, April 23, 1997. http://articles.baltimoresun.com/1997-04-23/news/7901010480_1_russian=hockey-sports-organizations-russian-sports. (Accessed June 9, 2014).

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Robyn Norwood, “Sych Slain; It’s ‘Life in Russia,’” *Los Angeles Times*, April 23, 1997. http://articles.latimes.com/1997-04-23/sports/sp-51467_1_valentin-sych. (Accessed June 9, 2014).

¹²⁶ Karen Crouse, “NHL’s Former Soviet Players Worried by Mayhem in Native Land,” *Sun Sentinel*, May 11, 1997. http://articles.sun-sentinel.com/1997-05-11/sports/9705100231_1_valentin-sych-russian-hockey-federation-central-red-army. (Accessed June 9, 2014).

¹²⁷ Ibid.

some criminals wanted to penetrate hockey and use hockey for their interests. And maybe he blocked the attempts.”¹²⁸

The media’s interpretation of Valentin Sych’s assassination pinned the issue to the Mafia’s involvement in Russian sports. Who can blame them? Among all the murders and violent crimes in Russia, the business manager of the Red Army club and the team’s photographer were killed in gangland style murders.¹²⁹ However, others have said Sych was not just an unsuspecting victim of murder. Regardless of the possibilities, there was something to be concerned about. As previously mentioned, Russian players were not completely shocked by the murder. Yet, they did find it a horrifying reminder of what was going on in the former Soviet Union. Although the NHL players who had connections with the Russian Mafia had nothing to do with the assassination, Valentin Sych’s death was a shocking dose of reality concerning the potential consequences of crossing organized crime. Nonetheless, the NHL did not change its casual stance toward the relationships between certain players and the Mafia.

The National Hockey League’s Official Stance on the Mafia Ties

The National Hockey League showed little reaction to the news of the murder of a high-profile figure in the Russian Ice Hockey Federation. The story was circulating in the news circuits in the United States and Canada for several weeks. Perhaps the NHL felt this was inevitable because of the Mafia’s major influence on the hockey leagues in Russia, or the fact that Valentin Sych was not an entirely innocent man himself—he was just as corrupt as the league’s officials. Nevertheless, the murder put the Mafia issue on center stage again, and the National Hockey League did not flinch. One might find this surprising because Sych was well

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ *Frontline*, “Mafia Power Play.”

known in the National Hockey League. According to Linden MacIntyre in “Mafia Power Play,” Sych was a major figure in Soviet hockey’s “Golden Age.” He was friends with hockey superstars like Bobby Orr and Bobby Hull.¹³⁰

The media urged the National Hockey League to come forward to discuss the overall issue of the Russian Mafia and its Russian hockey players. Linden MacIntyre sat down with William Daly, the Chief Legal Counsel for the National Hockey League for the 1999 PBS documentary. One issue MacIntyre raised in the interview involved criminal influence over gambling as a potential threat. Daly replied, “Well, I guess we’re very confident that [fixing] hasn’t [happened]. And I think you know the FBI has told us that they’ve looked into it and they have not only not been able to establish any effect on our games, but any attempts to affect our games.”¹³¹ Though the FBI and NHL looked into whether games were affected, it is difficult to determine whether there were attempts made but not followed through. Daly continued his point about the League’s so-called “best interest” of the game. “And we’ll make sure it doesn’t happen, because the League has to sell the integrity of its games, the most important facet of our game, and it’s something we protect very dearly.”¹³² Again, the issues with the integrity of the game were brought into the discussion.

MacIntyre raised the issue of gamblers seeing the popularity in hockey and ways to get involved with the sport on an illegal level. The NHL reacted to the formula of gambling on a “macro and micro” basis, according to Daly. “Well, as I said, on a macro basis we certainly follow up every allegation that might be made,” explained Daly. “We follow it up to our

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid., William Daly on the potential of games being fixed in the NHL. There are various of instances of game fixing in European and Russian leagues in which the NHL and FBI can refer to in order to determine whether games were directly affected. Whether games were actually affected but unrecognized by the FBI and NHL remains unknown.

¹³² Ibid.

satisfaction to make sure that there's nothing that might taint our games.”¹³³ However, according to Daly, the “micro basis” is more unlikely to affect the game, because it can be easily spotted if one or more players throw a game. As mentioned earlier, evidence of a player throwing a game can be determined by experts—a player can get himself into the penalty box for most of the game, or give a weak performance. Other international leagues have seen it done and know exactly what to look for. Regardless, the issue of criminal involvement with players remains a concern to the media.

As the interview continued, the issue of criminals having relationships with certain players was discussed. Linden MacIntyre raised a point to William Daly: “I’m reminded of a quote by [former NFL Commissioner] Pete Rozelle that, in sports, even a hint of suspicion is as serious as guilt.”¹³⁴ MacIntyre continued his point by reminding Daly of a certain Russian player and evidence of his association with Russian Mafia boss Vyacheslav Ivankov. “We have widely documented and publicized associations, for example with Slava Fetisov, and a man who’s now doing time for a variety of criminal activity. Don’t you consider that to have been a disreputable association?”¹³⁵ After a few seconds of silence, Daly replied by stating Fetisov did not personally know Ivankov. “I think maybe [Ivankov’s] company may have. And, you know, [Fetisov] claims not to have been involved in his company.”¹³⁶ Despite the existence of corporate documents from Ivankov's company that listed Fetisov as the president of the company, Daly and the National Hockey League continued to deny any connection between Slava Fetisov and Vyacheslav Ivankov.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid., Linden MacIntyre on Pete Rozelle and suspicion of guilt.

¹³⁵ Ibid., MacIntyre on Slava Fetisov’s alleged involvement with criminals.

¹³⁶ Ibid., Daly on Fetisov.

It should not be possible for the National Hockey League, or any organization, to deny involvement when legal documents connect their employees with criminals. For instance, the Quebec Nordiques' Russian star Valeri Kamensky had a relationship with an alleged criminal. Vyacheslav Sliva, a man who was connected with Ivankov, the "leader" of the Mafia, obtained his visa through Kamensky himself. Normally, this relationship would be seen as questionable. However, the visa was obtained with the help of the Quebec Nordiques. When asked about the involvement of the team and Kamensky's relationship with Sliva, William Daly stated that there was "no real friendship" between the two men.¹³⁷ MacIntyre asked, "So Mr. Kamensky lied to the team and the team lied to the government of Canada?"¹³⁸ After a brief pause, Daly responded: "I'm not prepared to conclude one way or the other on what Mr. Kamensky did."¹³⁹ The fact is that a NHL club lying to the Canadian government about obtaining a visa for a Russian criminal did not seem to raise any concern by the League itself. The "no comment" response by William Daly proved that the NHL did not find this an issue.

William Daly and the National Hockey League answered the tough questions raised by MacIntyre and the media in general. Their lack of concern was evident when questioned about Pavel Bure and Anzor Kikalishvili. Again, the best interest of the game was expressed by Daly. "We're well aware of [Kikalishvili's] reputation. We want to make sure that the relationship that Mr. Bure has with the individual is not one that would cause our game, or the integrity of our game, to come into question."¹⁴⁰ The integrity of the game is always a concern to any sports league, from little leagues to the professional level. William Daly, the legal representative of the

¹³⁷ Ibid., Daly on Valeri Kamensky and Vyacheslav Sliva.

¹³⁸ Ibid., MacIntyre on Kamensky and the Nordiques.

¹³⁹ Ibid., Daly on Kamensky and the Nordiques.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., Daly on Pavel Bure and Anzor Kikalishvili's relationship.

National Hockey League reiterated the importance of the integrity of the game. However, there was little mention about the integrity of the League itself.

The concern, however, is not just for the games being affected but for the players themselves getting involved in criminal activity. It is not the case that nothing can be done about player involvement in compromising relationships. Former NFL Commissioner Pete Rozelle stepped in and urged New York Jets quarterback Joe Namath to step away from his nightclub, *Bachelor's III*, because of bookies, gamblers, and gangsters spending their time at the club. Rozelle threatened to expel Namath if he did not sell his interest. Relating to the NHL, Pavel Bure, Slava Fetisov, Valeri Kamensky, and other players had an involvement with criminal enterprises, whether it was lending their names or having friendships with gangsters. The NHL's rule about the players holding themselves to the highest of standards on and off the ice and refraining from anything that might be detrimental to the Club and League was considered by William Daly as a "slippery slope."¹⁴¹

Conclusion

The National Hockey League did not take action towards the potentially dangerous relationships between the Russian players and the Russian Mafia. Looking at other scandals in sports may help explain the NHL's stance on the issue. For example, the NHL determined their games were not affected by the relationships. There was no evidence of games being fixed by the Mafia or the Russian players. Other sports leagues, such as Major League Baseball and boxing, saw their share of game fixing. And, because of the seriousness of the game and league's integrity, the leagues handed down punishments. Regardless of whether game outcomes are

¹⁴¹ Ibid., Daly describing the clause in the player's contract about off-ice actions.

affected, the integrity of the organization can still be harmed if a player or an employee of the league is involved with criminals.

Mike Danton, former NHL player, was arrested and convicted in a murder-for-hire plot against his agent David Frost in 2004. This serious crime took place while both Mike Danton and David Frost were employed by the National Hockey League and the Player's Association. While it is not at all the NHL's fault this particular crime occurred, the NHL knew of the troubled relationship between Frost, Danton, and Mike Danton's family. David Frost also had problems with minor leagues and his coaching approach. Regardless, the relationship from an early age was worrisome. Frost's reputation as a coach in a minor league should have raised flags, but this did not stop the NHLPA from certifying him as a player's agent.

The point of the Mike Danton/David Frost situation and other infamous scandals boils down to the player's personal relationships and the league's appropriate actions. An employer cannot control what its employees do outside of the workplace. However, according to the players' contracts, their actions outside of the rink or field could affect the club's and league's reputation. The National Hockey League's lack of action towards the relationships of their players and Russian Mafia members cannot be justified. Legal documents have suggested the relationships were real and potentially criminal.

Nevertheless, the NHL found the integrity of the game, and not the League itself, to be more important. The integrity of the game refers to the honesty of the sport. Things like cheating, fixing, gambling, and other issues that could affect games directly are a few examples of the integrity of the game being harmed. The integrity of a sports league attribute to different circumstances. For instance, the principles, reputation, and credibility of sports leagues can determine the integrity of the organization. In this particular situation with the Russian Mafia, the

National Hockey League showed more concern over the integrity of the game. Instead, the NHL should have protected its principles by protecting the players from any potential harm like extortion, physical harm, or worse. A sports league should protect not only the integrity of the game, but of the league itself.

Integrity aside, if the National Hockey League determined a game was affected, it would be publicized as much as other past game-fixing scandals. Nonetheless, since the personal relationships of individual athletes with criminals did not affect the game generally, the public would not react; therefore no action was required. This logic, however, does not excuse the League to ignore the potential harm of a player's relationship with a criminal. The players are not only representative of the game of hockey but also the National Hockey League. Perhaps the League made a distinction that was potentially problematic for the game, given how bad the Mafia control of hockey in Russia.

Though the National Hockey League determined there was no evidence of games being fixed, perhaps the reason for the League's ignorance was fear. The Russian Mafia was a dangerous criminal syndicate that made it clear in Russia it was in charge. The assassination of Valentin Sych made headline news throughout the world, proving again the dangers of life in Russia. The Russian players in the NHL were not surprised by the murder of Sych. The National Hockey League itself did not flinch, because it felt as if this was the way of life in the Russian hockey leagues. Regardless of its seemingly nonchalant attitude towards the murder, perhaps the league was actually masking a recognition of not overstepping its boundaries with the Russian Mafia and its relationships with certain players. Fear may have prevented the NHL from doing anything drastic towards the Russian hockey players. They may have feared the potential infiltration of the Mafia, especially because they saw their control over in the Russian Ice

Hockey Federation. Therefore, the NHL kept a distance. Whatever the reason behind the NHL's seeming lack of concern, the media and other Russian players beg to differ.

The next chapter will discuss the public's reaction to the Russian Mafia scandal, including the media's portrayal of the issue. The legacy of other sports scandals still receives attention today, including game fixing, gambling, and cheating. The Black Sox scandal of 1919, for example, is still discussed nearly one hundred years after the fact. Its legacy lives on as an example of how the integrity of a sport and its league can be affected by the wrongdoings of athletes. Why, however, was the issue of the Russian Mafia having relationships with Russian NHL players forgotten when it happened so recently? Pavel Bure, Slava Fetisov, and other Russian players' popularity did not change among hockey fans around the world. The next chapter will investigate why these issues generated media reaction but made no lasting impression on American and Canadian fans.

CHAPTER FOUR

OVERTIME—THE NATIONAL HOCKEY LEAGUE’S FORGOTTEN SCANDAL

Sports fans are important to the success of a team and organization. When a scandal erupts in sports, fans are sure to voice their opinions. However, when a sports league does not step in and punish the players involved, fans could feel as if there was nothing to be concerned about. This was the case with the concern over the Russian Mafia and the National Hockey League. The fans did not react to the allegations because the League did not react themselves.

The media reported on the troubles in Russia, especially the organized crime issue. Before the 1990s, the media would report on the Soviet Union, instilling the “us versus them” sentiment in North America. Therefore, when the Soviet Union collapsed, and Eastern Europeans moved west, the feelings continued because of the constant reports of corruption within the Eastern Bloc. With these reports, the issue of the Russian Mafia having its hand in Russian hockey leagues was also discussed in North American papers and news programs. When Russian players came over to the United States and Canada to play professional hockey, fans were not surprised to hear about the alleged Mafia connections. If the players were corrupt in Russia, they would have certainly brought their corruption over to North America. Therefore, National Hockey League fans did not react over the relationships between certain players and the Russian Mafia.

No Lasting Impression

The competitive nature of sports is what makes the viewing experience enjoyable for fans; the more dramatic, the bigger the response by fans and the media. However, the drama does not take place only on the field. When there is a controversy involving athletes, the media take the scandal and run with it. Throughout the twentieth century, there were several cases involving sports and controversies that are still referred to today as examples of what not to do. The infamous Black Sox scandal of 1919 remains the epitome of athletes' turning a friendly competition into a selfish disgrace. This particular scandal is still discussed today as an example of a league's integrity being harmed because of the bad decisions of eight professional baseball players. And Major League Baseball was not the only professional league that was stained by controversy. Other sports scandals, such as organized crime and boxing, gambling in the National Football League, and today's issue with steroids and other illegal substances, are all examples of harm to the best interests of the game.

The Russian Mafia's relationship with Russian National Hockey League players during the 1990s was discussed frequently in newspapers, investigative television programs, and sports networks. This was an ongoing topic of interest by the media for various reasons. First, the fall of the Soviet Union allowed Eastern Bloc citizens to emigrate to North America. Athletes from the former Soviet Union also made their way to North America hoping to find success. Regardless, the popularity of the League was growing because of the talent that was newly available to the league. Though the Russian players had copious amounts of talent, they also brought to the game the unknown culture that westerners did not fully understand. Finally, media coverage on this particular issue consistently referred to the corruption within Russia's borders. There was no question that this scandal was viewed by the media as important because of the mystery surrounding the Russian Mafia and the Russian hockey players in general. However, NHL fans

remained uninterested in media reports. Perhaps the media's reiteration of common misconceptions of Russian culture affected the response by fans. When it comes to a lasting impression in a scandal's legacy, why are certain controversies remembered while others are forgotten?

Men of Mystery

The closed nature of the Soviet Union left a lot to the imagination of westerners. Though the Soviet Union was not afraid to express its ideologies to the rest of the world, everyday life in the USSR was relatively unknown to westerners. Regardless, the sports arena provided a stage for the USSR to show what it was capable of on a different level. In international hockey, for example, the Soviet Union was Goliath. It dominated its opponents in international competition, including the Olympics and "friendly" series against the National Hockey League's best players. Westerners saw the USSR strength and wondered what exactly was the means to its undeniable success. The players were devoted not only to the game but also to their country. Their patriotic fervor, spurred by their government's support for sports and the pressure of the country and its fans applied to the team, showed that the Soviet approach to hockey was that it was more than just a game. It was a national duty. With this realization, westerners began to understand how the Soviet national team became the "Red Machine."

The Soviet Union did not have international movie stars, famous singers, or jet-setting socialites. They excelled in the arts, such as ballet, music, and literature for years. They had star athletes, particularly in the sports they dominated for decades. Sports such as gymnastics, soccer, weightlifting, and figure skating were featured in the Olympics, and the Soviet athletes performed at high levels there. Regardless of how successful the Soviet athletes were in these sports on the international stage, hockey was the undisputed king. As American and Canadian

spectators viewed the brilliance of the Soviet national hockey team, they began to see how their approach to hockey was not just a sport or business—it was a national obligation and a patriotic duty.

Boys as young as ten-years-old were plucked from their families and communities because of their potential talent. According to Mark Mulvoy of *Sports Illustrated*, Vladislav Tretiak, who today is known as one of the greatest hockey goalies who has ever played, was put into state-sponsored sports classes with other boys at the age of seven. These classes would build the boys' physique, discipline, and other developmental skills cherished in sports, especially hockey. "Tretiak obviously possesses the traits of the perfect goaltender," said Mulvoy, "so at the age of 11 he was given some armor and told to become the next Jacques Plante."¹⁴² The boys who were seen to have such talent were then shipped to camps where they became professional athletes for the USSR. Understanding of this form of national service and the importance of world domination on a specific world stage explains the stoic personality of Soviet athletes. They were trained to be nothing but the best athletes.

Once the National Hockey League began recruiting Soviet players in the late 1980s and into the early 1990s, their mechanical approach on and off the ice continued. When playing in the former Soviet Union, the players endured an 11-month hockey season while living and working under poor conditions, that is, compared to the NHL's standards. Under the communist regime, players were not paid anything like the same salary as their NHL counterparts. However, players who represented the Soviet Union were living a privileged existence in comparison to

¹⁴² Mark Mulvoy. "So the Canadians go to Hockeyland," *Sports Illustrated*, October 2, 1972. Jacques Plante was an innovative goaltender who not only won the Stanley Cup with the Montreal Canadiens six times but was also the first goalie to wear a mask. For further reading on the career and life of Plante, refer to Todd Denault's 2010 publication, *Jacques Plante: The Man Who Changed the Face of Hockey*.

other Soviet citizens. Those players who left the Eastern Bloc and entered the capitalist west and the NHL contracted for money unheard of in the communist world.

Perhaps this was not an easy situation for westerners to understand. The transition from communist to capitalist life was quite difficult. For instance, as reported in a *Sports Illustrated* article titled “The Honeymooners,” the everyday situations in American life bewildered players from the former Soviet Union. Jay Greenberg described a situation wherein a player’s wife was confused by the idea that the supermarket would be full of groceries every day—she did not have to take everything she needed all at once.¹⁴³ “The large salaries have caused many to wonder just where hockey is going to fit into the Soviets’ priorities.”¹⁴⁴ This particular dilemma was difficult for North Americans to understand. However, as discussed, the large salaries brought more problems to the players as they allegedly became targets of the Russian Mafia.

The media’s reaction to the allegations showed concern over the potential infiltration of organized crime in the National Hockey League. When certain Russian players were confronted by the media, their responses were, yet again, misunderstood by the American and Canadian public. Of course most of the players denied any connection, or even recognition of the possibility of extortion. Their reactions showed not only self-defense but also the defense of their country. Pavel Bure, for instance, when confronted about the alleged extortion, became very defensive of not only his image, but Russia’s reputation. “For you to understand, you have to [be] born in Soviet Union, in Russia, to understand whole society, whole mentality of the people—which you never will. I can explain [to] you, but it never would make sense to you.”¹⁴⁵ He continued his response about how different Russian and American societies are, and referred

¹⁴³ Jay Greenberg. “The Honeymooners,” *Sports Illustrated*, October 9, 1989.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ *Frontline*, “Mafia Power Play.” Pavel Bure referring to Americans’ not understanding Soviet citizens.

to them as different as “black and white.”¹⁴⁶ Bure’s response, basically repeating that Americans could never understand Russian society, validated the view Americans had towards Russians. Americans saw them as different, shut off, and stoic. The Russians’ unwillingness to open up did not help matters either.

In order to understand the lack of connection with this particular scandal, one must understand the North American view of Russia during this time. The media often reported on the criminal activity in Russia, with an emphasis on organized crime. With this understanding, should fans be surprised that there were allegations of Mafia connections with certain Russian players?

Stereotypes and the Media’s Influence

The media explored the possible connections when Réjean Tremblay wrote about extortion attempts in *La Presse* in December of 1993. According to the article, several Russian players were threatened by the Russian Mafia for money. Names such as Vyacheslav Fetisov, Igor Larinov, Alexi Zhitnik and Alexander Mogilny were known in the hockey community for their talent and difficult journeys from the former Soviet Union. In late 1993 and into 1994, however, their names were connected to the Russian Mafia. This particular decade not only explored the possible connections between players and organized crime, it also strengthened the North American attitude towards Russians.

Sports and investigative journalists analyzed the various connections between Russian players and the Mafia nearly on a weekly basis in early 1994. Regardless of the wave of attention on the Russian Mafia and hockey, the problems in Russia continued to make headlines,

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

especially when concerned with organized crime. Hockey aside, the understanding was that the Mafia's role in Russian society was quite influential. With the fall of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s, the beginnings of privatizing communist industrial enterprises went into effect. Essentially, everything in the former Soviet states was up for grabs. For instance, in an article on October 2, 1997, Georgie Anne Geyer of the *Universal Press Syndicate* spoke with U.S. Ambassador Jack Matlock about what was going to happen next in Russia. Matlock answered with what Geyer described as a "sad look" that the Mafia would end up controlling nearly everything.¹⁴⁷

Geyer's report discussed the troubling truth of where Russia was going to end up after the fall of the Soviet Union. "I remember that December [of 1988] in Moscow because I have tried over the nearly 10 years since then to find evidence that we were wrong in our fears. I did not want to believe what I suspected: Russia, the whittled-down descendant of the Soviet Union, was going to become the first major criminalized state in our times. Now it is time to stop denying."¹⁴⁸ Against the hopes of the former Soviet states of bouncing back, Russian organized crime had a strong grip on various aspects of life and politics. The fears of North Americans were not of what was going on within Russian borders but of what the Mafia controlled. One of the fears concerned whether the Russian Mafia had control over nuclear systems and missiles.¹⁴⁹ Though the idea of the Mafia having this kind of control may seem farfetched, the political leaders in Russia showed urgency over other issues. Russian President Boris Yeltsin said, "Criminals have today brazenly entered the political arena and are dictating its laws."¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁷ Georgie Anne Geyer. "The Russian Mafia," *The Victoria Advocate*, October 2, 1997.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

It was not just organized crime that helped shape westerner's opinions towards the Russians. The history and culture of Russia is relatively unknown by outsiders. Sergei Tagashov, a staff writer for the *Toledo Blade* discussed his views of why Americans had a certain perspective of Russians. "The wall produced by the Cold War separated the huge country from the outside world, and as a result people were fascinated to hear any kind of news from Russia."¹⁵¹ Tagashov continued his discussion stating that Americans knew only what they were told by the media. "The Red Flag demonstrations, which seem to be an essential part of Soviet life, if we judge by American movies showing 'Communist Russia,' were a small part of the real life there."¹⁵² Tagashov made a strong point about why Americans need a new perspective of Russians. However, it can be difficult when the press was releasing stories about the corruption within the Russian borders, and the issues with organized crime. News stories that focus on the bad may shape or strengthen the opinions of the readers. When Communism ended, westerners changed their view and assumed the Russian Mafia was the new thing to fear. This was the revised western belief of Russians.

Regardless of whether some news reports try to show the positive characteristics of Russians, like that of Sergei Tagashov who urged for a new attitude, the controversial stories seemed to prevail. Georgie Anne Geyer's 1996 article "Russian Mafia Danger" discussed the murder of Paul Tatum, a 41-year-old American entrepreneur who was gunned down by the Russian Mafia in Moscow. Geyer essentially reminded the reader of the dangers within Russia, especially with the Mafia. She also wrote a warning for the West. "All of this is bad enough for Russia--it will take them several decades to work out of this abyss--but it should also toll a

¹⁵¹ Sergei Tagashov. "U.S. needs new perspective on Russia," *Toledo Blade*. September 13, 1992.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

warning bell to the West to be extremely careful of over-involvement in a country so bedeviled.”¹⁵³

Reports such as the articles by Georgie Anne Geyer and others flooded the media for years. The fears expressed in the news were well founded. In a place as unstable as Russia and other former Soviet states, it was no surprise that the media and North American public formed these opinions about people from the former Soviet Union. Americans already had strong opinions about the communists decades before the collapse of the Soviet Union; and the stereotype of Russians as being corrupt remained in the 1990s. The Mafia’s control within the Russian borders made matters worse, only strengthening the initial feelings of the American public.

When the charges were made that Russian NHL players had connections with the Russian Mafia, the American and Canadian public were not surprised because of the exposure of organized crime–related issues in the media. Also, the media trivializing organized crime was not a new concept. For decades, the press reported on the Italian-American Mafia, the Jewish Mafia, and other crime syndicates because they were mysterious, dangerous, and fascinating. The Mafia is embedded in American popular culture. There are movies, television shows, books, and constant discussions on the issue, perhaps because the media glamorized it. The Russian Mafia gave a certain glamour to the Russian story, something North Americans did not know much about. The Mafia was alluring because it added to the notion of being exotic and intriguing, especially to Americans.

¹⁵³ Geyer. “Russian Mafia Danger,” *Ellensburg Daily Record*. November 14, 1996.

Dysfunction in Russian Hockey

The assassination of the president of the Russian Ice Hockey Federation in 1997 shook the hockey community. American and Canadian media reported on the murder, which provided a shocking reminder of how the Mafia's control in Russia continued to be ruthless. Valentin Sych's murder certainly did not change the mood of National Hockey League fans. The Russian players in the NHL who did not have friendly connections with the Mafia expressed uneasiness over the dangers of living in Russia and other former Soviet states. The anxiety some players felt led them to move their families out of Europe and into the United States or Canada. The idea that Russian hockey players were finding the circumstances in Russia so dire should have concerned the North American public, especially if there were possibilities of Mafia influence extending to North America.

Organized crime had a grasp on the Russian hockey leagues long before the assassination of Valentin Sych. As mentioned in the first chapter, the success of revamping the once successful Red Army club led to the Mafia's taking an interest in the suffering league. However, the success of rebuilding the hockey programs in Russia did not last long because of the way things were being run. Allen Abel of *Sports Illustrated* discussed the status of Russian hockey as of 1998: "While Russian schoolboys pursue their fantasy of glory and riches in North America, their country's hockey superstructure is falling apart in a tragicomedy of bankrupt teams, empty arenas, absentee superstars, ham-handed extortion, and unsolved murders."¹⁵⁴ This was also happening across the former Soviet sports structure, including figure skating, basketball, soccer, and even ballet.

¹⁵⁴ Allen Abel. "Escaping Hockey's Gulag," *Sports Illustrated*, April 20, 1998.

This dysfunction in the Russian Ice Hockey Federation led to many Russian players to seek to play elsewhere in the world, especially for the National Hockey League. As for the NHL itself, it was more than happy to bring in more talent. According to Abel, it was not just the fame and fortune that attracted Russian boys and men to move to North America and play in the NHL. “Such Godfather-ish mayhem—along with reports that several Russian NHL stars have been victims of extortion attempts by the amorphous Russian ‘mob’—may explain the eagerness of some expatriates to sever their ties with the old country.”¹⁵⁵

With this understanding of the disorder within Russia and its hockey leagues, National Hockey League fans may have felt that the Mafia allegations were inevitable. The issues in the Russian Ice Hockey Federation left North Americans thinking that the Russian players, especially those who had alleged friendships with criminals, were already dysfunctional. This view related back to the idea of westerners thinking that the people from the former Soviet Union were corrupt individuals who did not know any better. Some believed that Russian citizens were used to the corruption and dysfunction in their country and that there was no structure in the government; therefore no structure in Russian society. Perhaps the difficulties of the Russians’ integration in North America led NHL fans to accept their dysfunction and inevitable rumors of Mafia connections.

The Fan’s Real Expectations

Though the media played a role in shaping the opinions of the public towards Eastern Europeans, whether they changed hockey fans’ perspectives remained in question. Hockey fans were undoubtedly concerned with one thing: winning. They watched their favorite team and

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

players perform at the highest level. National Hockey League fans not only watched the game in hopes of their team winning, they wanted to enjoy the performance given by the best players in the world. Fans tuned in to *ESPN* and other sports networks to relive the game and to see what else went on throughout the league. With this understanding, did fans care what the professional athletes did in their personal lives?

To a certain extent, fans *do* care about what goes on off the ice or field. For example, if athletes do not stay in shape during the off-season, and being out of shape affects their performance upon return, fans notice and react. Or, if athletes are found partying and drinking all night during the professional season and that behavior affects their performance, fans care. However, if there is no direct effect on performance, fans usually do not care.

Hockey fans read the various news articles and viewed the investigative television programs, such as *Mafia Power Play*, yet showed little reaction. It can be argued that the lack of reaction by the fans was due to the fact that the athletes' performances were not directly affected. Pavel Bure, Slava Fetisov, Valeri Kamensky, and other Russian hockey players continued to deliver on the ice during the NHL season. Athletes' personal friendships could not harm the game, unless illegal activity caused them to give a lackluster performance. As discussed in the previous chapter, the National Hockey League's main concern was the integrity of the game. The League monitored every game for any indication of outside influences. For example, if Pavel Bure did not perform at the level expected from him, fans would feel he might have intentionally thrown a game because of his association with the Russian Mafia. That would likely happen only if the poor play was frequent and the possibility of Mafia influence was reported. Apart from the speculation, there was no evidence of fixed matches.

Regardless of whether the claims could or could not affect games, hockey fans should be concerned about the potential threat. When *La Presse* released the article about Russian players being targeted for extortion, fears of players being hurt should have worried fans. According to *La Presse*, players who refused to give money or cooperate with the gangsters were threatened with having their legs broken or, worse, their families back in Eastern Europe harmed.¹⁵⁶ The fact that there was a threat of physical harm to players and other circumstances that could very well affect their performance on the ice should have concerned hockey fans throughout the world. Yet despite the threats, fans remained aloof to the situation.

Do Fans Find Certain Scandals More Important?

As discussed before, various scandals and incidences in sports have caused uproars. Scandals that included cheating, violence, doping, and discrimination were followed by serious reactions not only by the media but from the fans. Some of the most infamous scandals involved cheating of some sort, whether it was game fixing or, more recently, steroid and growth hormone use to enhance a player's performance. The fact is, however, that there are scandals in sports nearly every day. According to Paul C. Weiler in *Leveling the Playing Field*, "American fans rarely open the sports section of the newspaper or turn on the sports news without reading or hearing about a lawsuit."¹⁵⁷

The media report on all types of sports scandals, from cheating to personal affairs of the athletes. Russian hockey players' personal lives were tied to the Russian Mafia throughout the 1990s. Whether the ties were friendly or threatening, the reports filled sport sections in major

¹⁵⁶ Réjean Tremblay, "Viatcheslav Fetisov paierait pour «la protection» de sa famille." *La Presse*.

¹⁵⁷ Paul C. Weiler. *Leveling the Playing Field: How the Law Can Make Sports Better for Fans*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 1.

newspapers. This particular controversy was not hidden from readers and fans—there was no way of avoiding the issue. However, fans did not seem to worry about it. Perhaps the reaction was due to the idea of North Americans viewing people from the former Soviet Union as corrupt, backwards, and mysterious. If fans were to react, the discussion would have grown amongst the NHL community. Fans might have avoided buying of the player’s jersey or any endorsements they are connected to, or perhaps they would boycott games. Financial burdens to the League, teams, or players can be damaging. If this were the case, the NHL would have stepped in and done something about the claims.

Though there are various scandals in sports, why are certain controversies followed by major fan reactions while others are seemingly ignored? This particular question can relate back to the previous chapter, focusing on how the major leagues handle controversial situations. If the league comes down hard, fans are sure to react with strong feelings. The Black Sox scandal, match fixing in boxing, and violence during games generated strong reactions by the fans because games were directly affected. Individual situations, however, did not produce the same reaction in fans unless, of course, the scandal was so heinous and personal—like racism, drug violations, or violence—in which case fans certainly showed a reaction. Mike Danton, for instance, was a professional hockey player who attempted to have his agent killed. Though this did not directly affect the game, it was a horrible attempt that met with serious consequences.

Fans do not care with whom individual athletes associate outside of the game, even if they are “friendly” with alleged criminals. Russian hockey players Pavel Bure, Slava Fetisov, Valeri Kamensky, and others had relationships with Russian Mafia members. The media found this alarming, but hockey fans in the United States and Canada did not seem to worry too much

about it. If there had been any indication of hockey games having been affected, fans would have reacted; but this was not the case.

Conclusion

Pavel Bure, Slava Fetisov, and other Russian players remained unfazed by the press, despite their alleged close relationships with top members of the Russian Mafia. Perhaps the players were well aware of the potential trouble they could have been in if they got more involved with the Mafia. Press releases referring to the Mafia in Russia were far less potent. If Russian journalists reported on organized crime, they were likely targeted. In a *New York Times* article titled, “Threatened by Russian Mob, Journalist Pushes Back,” the concern over journalists in Eastern Europe was discussed. As mentioned in the first chapter, journalist Blaine Harden expressed the concern over sixteen Eastern European journalists being killed in a stretch of 6 years.¹⁵⁸ There has been an “alarming pattern of violence against Russian and East European journalists who cover crime and corruption.”¹⁵⁹ Nevertheless, the fans in North America did not see the news regarding the Mafia connections as a major problem. It seemed as if NHL fans did not find the connections surprising. The consequences of the connections were usually felt in Russia and not in North America and this may have contributed to this view.

In essence, there was something to be concerned about. There were Russian hockey players who were threatened, either directly or through their families. Some players were not shy in suggesting the extortion was occurring. In a *New York Times* article from December of 1993, Joe LaPointe explained how players feared for their families. “[Mike] Smith, one of the NHL’s experts on Russian hockey affairs, said that ‘it’s a huge problem’ and that many Russian players

¹⁵⁸ Harden. “Threatened by Russian Mob, Journalist Pushes Back.” *New York Times*, March 5, 1999.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

want to move their families to North America to keep them from being harmed or threatened with harm in their homeland.”¹⁶⁰ Yet despite the Russians’ fear, the fans did not react.

Who was to blame for the fans’ lack of response towards the issue? Although the media was overbearing when it came to sports scandals, there were truths behind the stories. But the fans remained unfazed, perhaps because they felt as if Russians were already corrupt. Coming from a former communist regime, Eastern Europeans were difficult for North Americans to understand. Their stoic attitudes confirmed the Westerners’ view of people from the former Soviet Union. Plus, the reports of the corruption within Russia’s hockey leagues did not surprise fans when the news reported on Mafia involvement.

One thing to consider was the media’s history of portraying the Soviet Union, which eventually continued after the collapse of the USSR. Winston Churchill once described Russia as a “riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.”¹⁶¹ This was a widespread perspective of Eastern Europeans. After the fall of the Soviet Union, however, these feelings continued, especially in the press. Norman Solomon, a syndicated columnist out of San Francisco, urged the media and public to be more open minded. He expressed concern over the way in which the media portrayed Russia. “Overall, much of the reporting we get from Russia is skewed by assumptions at U.S. news organizations.”¹⁶² He continued to quote a Moscow correspondent from the Canadian press. “From what I’ve seen, they still have that Cold War chip on their shoulder,” said Fred Weir, who has been a resident of Russia for over ten years. “They tend to see everything in terms of the struggle between good democrats and nasty commies.”¹⁶³

¹⁶⁰ LaPointe, Joe. “Hockey; Russian Crime Groups Harassing Expatriates.” *New York Times*, December 24, 1993.

¹⁶¹ Norman Solomon. “Most reporting on Russia lacks perspective.” *Eugene Register-Guard*, June 16, 1996.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

The stereotypical views of Russians spilled over into the 1990s, years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Perhaps the Western media was not considering the real people of Russia, and only focusing on the struggles of Russian politics. Fred Weir was “appalled at the way the Western media have accepted, with only mild hand-wringing, the total, Soviet-like domination of the Russian media by the Yeltsin administration.”¹⁶⁴ Russia’s president Boris Yeltsin and his administration was notorious for having a tight grasp on the media within Russia. According to the article, the control Yeltsin had over the media was often defended by Western journalists, which was doing more damage to Russia.¹⁶⁵ Nevertheless, Norman Solomon’s call for Western media to have a new perspective on Russia did not come quickly. The press continued its coverage of Russia, especially the damaging image of the Russian Mafia.

Hockey fans were only concerned about their team winning games, not what the media was reporting about the Russian players. Fortunately, the connections between certain players and the Russian Mafia did not disrupt any NHL games. Although there were Mafia-related murders within the Russian Ice Hockey Federation, the deadly aspect of the Mafia did not make its way into the National Hockey League. The fans cared only about the games and their favorite teams’ performance. If the Mafia directly disrupted the game by harming a player or fixing a match, the fans would have reacted and then immersed themselves in the scandal the media were trying to expose.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

CHAPTER FIVE CONCLUSION

When *Frontline*'s Linden MacIntyre sat down with Vyacheslav "Slava" Fetisov in 1999, the conversation turned sour when the Russian Mafia entered the discussion. Fetisov, a Stanley Cup-winning Russian, became defensive when MacIntyre asked whether he was being treated fairly. "I fight against most powerful system in the world, Communist system," explained Fetisov. "And to beat the system I'm helpless here, you know. . . . I was embarrassed, I was in shock when this situation comes up."¹⁶⁶ Slava Fetisov was clearly frustrated with the constant questions of Mafia association. For the previous couple of years, Fetisov and other Russian hockey players had been consistently asked about their involvement with the Mafia. Whether they were associated or not, their answers always seemed defensive. "And I get beat up for all this stuff. I get beat up by Communist system, I get beat up by you know . . . American system."¹⁶⁷

The conversation ended with MacIntyre asking the question that concerned North Americans: "What are you famous Russian hockey players going to do about this problem that's become fairly large, I think?"¹⁶⁸ This particular question had often been asked over the previous six or so years. As predicted, Slava Fetisov denied there being any problem. "If you're not going to talk about it, it's not a problem at all. I don't see any problem."¹⁶⁹ His reaction read as if he

¹⁶⁶ *Frontline*, "Mafia Power Play." Vyacheslav Fetisov discussing his frustration towards the allegations.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, Linden MacIntyre.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, Fetisov.

were blaming the media for the negative press. But it stands to reason: regardless of what Fetisov and other players said, if there was not a problem, the media would be reporting on something else.

The 1990s brought several controversial sports stories that continued to make headlines: the Tonya Harding and Nancy Kerrigan feud, the O.J. Simpson double murder trial, and Mike Tyson's biting Evander Holyfield's ear off. These stories all entranced the American public—it was difficult to look away. However, the Russian Mafia and National Hockey League situation did not elicit the same reactions. Although the allegations were undoubtedly controversial, the attention of the public and the National Hockey League was minimal.

The outcry of the media focused on the fact that the NHL did so little about the situation. Coaches, teammates, and other Russian players were not shy in expressing their fears and concerns over the extortion allegations. According to Robert I. Friedman in *Red Mafiya*, the FBI became frustrated with the NHL. “The league just didn't want us poking around,” said Michael Bopp, the congressional committee's chief investigator.¹⁷⁰ In 1996, when the U.S. Senate held hearings on the Russian Mafia, the NHL “stonewalled” the investigation.¹⁷¹

The NHL did not stand by idly, however, when Friedman wrote his *Details* article describing the close friendships between players and the Mafia. In fact, the NHL hired James Moody, former FBI agent who headed the organized crime department, to do a private investigation into the situation. According to the NHL, there was no evidence to cause concern. Of course, they expressed concern over Pavel Bure's relationship with Anzor Kikalishvili, and said they were monitoring the situation. In November of 1996, the National Hockey League issued a statement in the investigation:

¹⁷⁰ Friedman, Robert I. *Red Mafiya*, 197.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 196.

Periodically, there has been speculation and rumor about who may or may not be associated with organized crime in Russia. The National Hockey League is in constant contact with law enforcement agencies on these and on other issues, and we will take appropriate steps to protect the integrity of our game and the safety of our players whenever necessary.¹⁷²

The League did conduct an investigation. However, nothing came out of the investigation. According to Friedman, Jim Moody did find the situation troubling. “Moody sent his report to NHL headquarters, and the league could no longer plead ignorance, for it confirmed a disturbing portrait of the mob’s insidious influence over the league.”¹⁷³ Despite what Moody found and brought to the NHL, the players in question were never reprimanded, suspended, or even censured. The NHL felt that there was nothing that was harming the integrity of the League.

The National Hockey League’s concern was the integrity of the game rather than what went on within the League itself. Yes, there was no evidence of games having been affected, which was the main concern of the NHL. However, the morality clause of the players’ contract was broken. The clause called for the player to hold himself up to the highest standard, on and off the ice. What a player did outside of the game would be just as detrimental to the club and the National Hockey League as if the rules were broken during the game. Breaking the morality clause should have prompted the League to do something, especially as a public organization.

In essence, the National Hockey League did not do much about the situation. The fans did not show much concern either. Perhaps the reason lies in the fact that the NHL did not suspend or reprimand players or indeed do anything that would affect the game significantly.

¹⁷² “ESPN reports of Russian Mafia connection to Pavel Bure.” *Street & Smith’s SportsBusiness Daily*. November 4, 1996. <http://www.sportsbusinessdaily.com/Daily/Issues/1996/11/4/Leagues-Governing-Bodies/ESPN-REPORTS-OF-RUSSIAN-MAFIA-CONNECTION-TO-PAVEL-BURE.aspx>. (accessed September 20, 2014).

¹⁷³ Friedman. *Red Mafiya*, 199.

Sports fans can be concerned about what goes on behind closed doors in their favorite player's life, but in the end, fans care more about their team winning.

The NHL's response and unconcerned fans did not stop the media from reporting on the issue. For decades, newspapers, television reports, and other media resources have reported on the Soviet Union. The reports were not focused on the positive things happening in the USSR. Therefore, the negative press may have shaped the attitudes of the North American public. The hockey scandal was something the media felt to be troubling. In particular, the horrific Mafia-related murders and stories that occurred in Russia were center stage in news outlets. This coverage also shaped the opinions of Americans and Canadians, who continued to believe people from the former Soviet Union were corrupt.

The Mafia allegations within the NHL should have concerned hockey fans. The media were reporting on the gangland-type murders of hockey figures in Russia, including the president of the Russian Ice Hockey Federation. Men who were playing in Russia had aspirations to play in the National Hockey League. If they came from a Mafia-run league in Russia, they certainly could have brought the same troubles to North America. This possibility was what journalists were concerned about. They feared that the issues in the hockey leagues in Russia would flow over into North America—and they did. A few players admitted to being the victims of extortion and consequently moving their families from Eastern Europe to North America. As for the players who had business and personal relationships with mobsters, little is known of what was happening behind closed doors.

Mafia Still Alive in Russian Hockey?

The first allegations of Mafia connections to the NHL were brought forth in December of 1993. Nearly twenty years later, the Mafia connection faded away. There is no current discussion

of whether the National Hockey League is under any influence or interruption by the Russian Mafia. In Russian hockey leagues, however, the Mafia is still in the conversation. Rick Westhead of Toronto's *The Star* described the chaos of the Kontinental Hockey League in a 2012 article: "Gun-slinging owners, mandatory overnights in remote team bases, sometimes before home games, and even planting illegal drugs on high-priced players whose team owners want to stop [them] playing is all part of life in the wild KHL."¹⁷⁴ One team in particular, the Avangard Omsk of Russia, was the focus of Westhead's discussion. The team's owner, Nikolai, whose family name is unknown by players and employees alike, has a reputation for "bringing a loaded gun into his team's dressing room after a bad loss."¹⁷⁵ Paying the players in the KHL also presents a difficult situation. "A handful of teams regularly fall behind in paying their players," explained Westhead, "and even when they do pay, some clubs insist on paying in cash."¹⁷⁶

The alleged organized crime involvement in the KHL is not the only problem. Poor air travel accommodations made headline news when the plane carrying the Yaroslavl Lokomotiv team crashed on September 7, 2011, killing 44 people. The sole survivor was a member of the flight crew.¹⁷⁷ "This crash is likely to have a severe impact on Russian hockey," said Ellen Barry and Andrew E. Kramer of the *New York Times*.¹⁷⁸ "The Yak-42 plane is among the aging Soviet-designed narrow-body aircraft that have been the focus of safety concerns after a series of

¹⁷⁴ Rick Westhead. "KHL: Gun-slinging owners, drugs, dodgy air travel all part of the game." *The Star*. January 6, 2012. http://www.thestar.com/sports/hockey/2012/01/06/khl_gunslining_owners_drugs_dodgy_air_travel_all_part_of_the_game.html. (Accessed September 29, 2014).

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Ellen Barry and Andrew E. Kramer. "Crash wipes out elite Russian hockey team, killing several veterans of the N.H.L." *New York Times*. September 7, 2011. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/08/world/europe/08russia.html>. (Accessed September 29, 2014).

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

problems and crashes.”¹⁷⁹ The idea of the poor quality planes transferring hockey teams in Europe’s most elite league was alarming. Though this tragedy may not have had anything to do with the Mafia (the crash was blamed on pilot error), the subject of the league’s priorities raised plenty of questions.

NHL–Russian Relations Today

The National Hockey League today has talented Eastern European players on its rosters. Every team has someone from Eastern Europe. Russia still produces some of the best athletes in various sports, especially hockey. The relationship between the NHL and Russia, however, continues to struggle. Russian hockey players who seek to play in the National Hockey League still have difficulty making their way over to North America.

Pittsburgh Penguins’ star forward Evgeni Malkin had a defection-type split from the Kontinental Hockey League, Eastern Europe’s premier league, in 2006. When his team, Metallurg from Magnitogorsk, Russia, arrived in Helsinki, Finland, for a game, Malkin was nowhere to be found. His disappearance left his teammates and fans wondering what happened to him. “Four days later,” said Alex Rodriguez of the *Chicago Tribune*, “when the 20-year-old superstar turned up in the U.S. to embark on a career in the National Hockey League, they seethed.”¹⁸⁰

Why would Evgeni Malkin defect from his team? The KHL already knew the reason too well. “Malkin is only the latest in a long line of Russian hockey marvels who have parted ways

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Alex Rodriguez. “NHL defection a slap shot at Russian pride.” *Chicago Tribune*. September 14, 2006. http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2006-09-14/news/0609140109_1_metallurg-russian-hockey-russian-nhl. (Accessed September 20, 2014).

with the motherland for fat contracts and lucrative endorsements in North America.”¹⁸¹ Evgeni Malkin went on to win several awards in the NHL, including the Art Ross, Conn Smythe, Hart Memorial, and the Stanley Cup. The split certainly left a bitter taste among his former KHL team colleagues. Gennady Velichkin, the general manager of Malkin’s former team, “estimates Metallurg, Magnitogorsk’s steel production enterprise, has invested millions of dollars ... in Malkin’s development—from the age of 6—through hockey school and junior leagues.”¹⁸²

Evidently, the types of investments Russia makes on its talented youth are still present today. It is no wonder the National Hockey League has difficulties recruiting players from Russia and the Kontinental Hockey League. “The NHL usually pays teams from other countries \$200,000 as a compensation fee. However, Russia is the only major hockey power to refuse to sign on to the NHL’s compensation policy.”¹⁸³

Current Russian players are still misunderstood. In the 1990s, big name Russian players were seen as emotionless and awkward. Though Americans and Canadians have learned more about Russia and the struggles of becoming a capitalist society, the differences still remain. Sergei Fedorov, the second Soviet hockey player to defect from the Soviet Union, spoke about why his generation of Russian NHL players were called enigmas. “Russians were not suspicious; they were just subtle. Like Vikings. They speak softly, but carry a big stick. I think just in general, it’s been a lot of misconceptions and misunderstanding.”¹⁸⁴ Enigmas or not, the Mafia came dangerously close to the National Hockey League.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Bruce Arthur. “The NHL’s Russian problems: NHL playoffs 2012: Russian enigmas still prove puzzling.” *National Post*. May 1, 2012. <http://sports.nationalpost.com/2012/05/01/nhls-russian-enigma-still-proves-puzzling/>. (Accessed September 21, 2014).

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