

Russian Mafia Tattoos - The Brutal Truth

Most people associate Russian Mafia tattoos with David Cronenberg's award winning film "Eastern Promises" in which Viggo Mortensen portrayed an ex-con turned driver for a Russian Mafia Boss, who works his way up the chain of command only to find out there's even more corruption and deception than what he experienced within the prison walls. His story merely skims the surface...

In reality, the history behind Russia's criminal underground was spawned from a generation of men who, due to the economical collapse of the Soviet Union, were left with nothing - turning to crime for a means of survival. As communism fell and the safety net was removed, many of the desperate ended up in Russian prison camp system, also known as the Soviet gulag, which to this day is known as one of the most infamous and hellish prison systems in history. It was within these camps that a new breed of professional criminal was born. A criminal network based on discipline, tradition and more importantly, rank.

Russian Mafia tattoos are more than a statement...

As these networks of seasoned Russian criminals began to establish themselves from both sides of the prison walls, they would tattoo religious and neo-nazi symbols all over their bodies as a form of recognition amongst their fellow peers, but also as a means of living with their sins. It was not unheard of for Russian Mafia Tattoos to be forcefully inked on an individual whom was deemed to be untrustworthy, or an individual who was a child molester or rapist - which went against the strong religious undertones of that time.

Common symbols and their meanings...

To the naked eye most of these tattoos represent religious imagery, such as cathedrals or monasteries, but as the Russian Mafia began to migrate to New York, Philadelphia, and Florida between the 1970's and 1990's, the American authorities and secret services began to decipher the code which lies beneath these markings of worship. They realized that not only was there a system behind Russian Mafia Tattoos, but these criminals would literally use these symbols as a business card to whom the other was, and more importantly, what sins they've committed.

Cathedral or Church - Depending on the number of towers a particular tattoo has, it usually refers to the number of years, or amount of times that individual has been incarcerated.

Cobweb - Usually designated for someone who has committed murder.

Cat or Cats - If there is a tattoo of a single cat, this means that the individual was a thief before being imprisoned. If there are multiple cats this means that the individual was part of a gang of thieves.

Stars - This seems to be the most recognized tattoo in the mainstream media. If the owner has stars on each of his knees, this mean's he will never bow down or never be brought to his knees. Stars on the shoulders are usually awarded when a particular individual has reached a criminal status or high ranking within the network - such as a Captain. Different types of stars mean different things as well.

What's even more frightening, and sad, is that in modern day Russia it is estimated that 70% of the upper echelon of society, politics and law enforcement is controlled by the Russian Mafia families and criminal networks. It is said that the same percentage of banks are also ran by the mob in Russia. The fall of communism turned a once powerful and formidable competitor into a country so corrupt that it's highest offices are products of crime. It's common amongst society for people to associate criminal organizations with the Italian Mafia, but the reality is that if you ask anyone who knows anything on this topic they will tell you that compared to the Russian Mafia, Italian crime families are like pre-school - there is no comparison.