Brighton Beach – effect of cultural globalization

My project will deal with the issue of Russian/Jewish immigration into the area of Brooklyn, NY and the ways that it has been and currently is affecting the surrounding contemporary Brooklyn community. I will look and explain the major historical occurrences of immigration into this region and give a specific timeline of dates when these movements took place. I will focus on the growing Russian/Jewish settlement of Brighton Beach that is located on the eastern coast of Brooklyn and demonstrate how it was the major employer of the immigrant workers that either came there out of free will or were planted into that environment by the existing and flourishing Russian Mafia. I will also take a look at how the Brooklyn business sector has changed with the incursion of small businesses that were established in the Brighton Beach area and different neighborhoods of Brooklyn. There will be a section dedicated to a demonstration of how the growing Russian/Jewish population in this area keeps up with its tradition and doesn’t assimilate with the coexisting American culture around which these people live.

Although the word globalization suggests a comprehensive and self-evident process, it is an incomplete term. It does not indicate precisely what is being globalized: the assumption is that it means the emergence of a single worldwide economy, into which all economies must integrate themselves, or more accurately, be integrated in the passive voice. But globalization does not obligingly halt at some ill-defined frontier between economics, society and culture. Indeed, it has its own set of cultural attendants, which exercise a profound influence on the life of peoples everywhere. By definition,
globalization makes all other cultures local. But to billions of people all over the world, their culture is not local. It is central to their lives and who they are. Globalization eclipses, or at least subordinates all previous ways of answering need and of dealing with the vicissitudes of human life. All other ways of life are diminished and marginalized at a stroke. (Seabrook, 2004)

This definition of globalization explains perfectly my topic of interest, which happens to be the effect of a foreign culture (Russian/Jewish) on the community of Brighton Beach, NY. Instead of the World being globalized by a certain culture, we have a small, but, nevertheless, important community in New York that gives jobs and living quarters to a large population of Russian and Jewish émigrés. The structure of businesses and sources of employment in this neighborhood are largely affected by the presence of the Russian speakers in the area and their intermingling with the mob. The mob, on one hand, participates in illegal operations, but, on the other hand, it creates opportunity of the residents of this community to be enticed in a lifestyle that would resemble the one that they have known and in which they have lived for most of their lives.

“Russian immigrants have come in steady waves for the past three centuries. Fur traders who crossed the Bering Strait in the 1700's, poor peasants and persecuted Jews fleeing Russia during the Bolshevik Revolution, Russians escaping the Communist Soviet Union under Stalin and Lenin and the Jewish immigrants who left Russia during World War II have all come to America in search of a better life. In the past thirty years, a new ethnic group has joined America's "melting pot": the Soviet Jews. These recent immigrants have thrived on the eastern seaboard and have even formed their own communities in New York City. The Soviet Jews have risen from a difficult past and are
becoming influential members in American society.” (Brighton Neighborhood Association)

The first wave of Russian settlement in the United States happened in the mid-eighteenth century. Fur traders from Russia crossed the Bering Strait into Alaska, which at that time was still Russian territory. (Until czar Alexander sold it to the United States government) Soon after the discovery of Alaska, the settlers began coming over in large quantities in search of fur and gold. Other than the fur and gold merchants there were vast movements of refugees that fled Russia for their religious beliefs or the rejection of them by the Russian government. Many of those settlers remained in Alaska and their families still live there today, others, however, have migrated easterly in search for employment and more profitable living.

The second wave of immigration to America happened from 1880 to 1914. These years marked a dreadful time for certain ethnic groups in Russia, which included poor peasants and persecuted Jews. The Russian government of that time employed a number of new policies that were utilized in order to purge different ethnic groups within the country. This process was later to be called “Russification”. Many Jews and peasants were stripped from their basic rights and the lands, which they lived on, were taken away from them. Many of these refugees fled to neighboring Poland, others participated in the second largest immigration wave to the United States.

Once the Russian Revolution struck the country in 1917, many people of Russian-Jewish decent started fleeing the chaotic revolutionary scene. The majority of these migrants happened to be skilled laborers, who not only brought their whole families to America, but also their intense work desire and experience, which was definitely needed
during that time. The majority of these immigrants settled in New York City’s lower east side, which today is still predominantly Jewish. More of these types of migrant workers came over to the same areas in the wake of World War II, due to effects of chain migration and fear of the post war purging that was happening in Russia at that time.

Lastly the fourth wave of Russian immigration and the most recent began its life in the 1960’s. The major reason behind it was the desire of Soviet Jews to come to the United States. “In the early 1960's, many Jews were leaders in a movement among eastern block intellectuals to create an end to human rights violations and more immigration rights for Jews in the Soviet Union. Also, the Arab Israeli War of 1967 stirred up serious sentiments in the Russian Jewish community; above all, this émigré Russian population wanted to partake in a right to live and pray in Israel. Jewish movements and demonstrations for immigration began taking place around the U.S.S.R, and soon more Soviet Jews were given the right to move to Israel. In 1971, when the United States made a deal with the Soviet Union for improved trade agreements in return for more lenient immigration policies, the doors were opened some. At this time any Soviet Jew could obtain an exit visa for Israel, but they still could not go to the United States. Then in 1976, HIAS (the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society) started to give Soviet Jews the chance to settle in America. Many Soviet Jews soon applied for visas for two reasons: first, Soviet Universities were continuing to restrict the number of Jewish students, and secondly there was a shortage of food, clothing and housing in the U.S.S.R which had been a problem since the World War II.” (Schwarzbaum, 1998)
**Brighton Beach**

The Soviet Jews have formed flourishing communities in the New York City, most notably Brighton Beach, a community on the edge of Brooklyn and on the Atlantic Ocean. The vast majority of the Jews have stayed on the east coast; most of them still live in the New York area. In the beginning, the New York Association for New Americans (NYANA) helped the Soviet Jews find a community for themselves. The NYANA felt that Brighton Beach was a perfect spot for a new Russian community; the area had a lot of cheap, solid housing available, cheap commercial space and an organized senior services program. The Soviet Jews soon revived the community. Vacancy rates were transformed from thirty percent in the seventies to waiting lists for up to two years at the present. Also, the previously quiet downtown area now holds many shops and restaurants owned by Soviet Jews. Brighton Beach is a truly successful immigrant community.

Russia has had a turbulent and violent history, which has caused many of its citizens to come to America. The immigrants, coming for various reasons including religious oppression and poverty, have been successful in America. Many of these immigrants have slowly assimilated into the American “melting pot”.

**Change in Society of Brighton Beach**

Prior to the vast movement of the Russian émigrés to the Brighton Beach area the business sector of this neighborhood was underdeveloped and almost inexistent. There was little shopping, entertainment and business development present on Brighton Beach due to lack of demand of it by the surrounding community. With the rapid wave of Russian - Jewish émigrés there was quick change undertaken to the area that, in the fullest meaning of the word, exhibits the aura of a Russian – Jewish community. Today
Brighton Beach Avenue, the main commercial strip, is very lively. It has numerous Russian Nightclubs and restaurants, which could Rival Manhattan Clubs with their array of shows, musical performances and political rallies for the Russian, Hebrew, and English speaking folk. There are casinos, bookstores, restaurants, banks, and many department stores that offer their services mainly in Russian. The shows that are presented in the clubs feature top Russian singers that frequently stage concerts in the US due to the demand of their listeners and viewers. Chain stores and businesses have been capsizing in this “old world” community. For example, the last McDonalds that was located on the intersection of Brighton Beach and Neptune Avenue was closed in the late 70’s due to its unpopularity.

There are a variety of immigrants from the Middle East and Asia that are joining the new Russian Americans in their search for better employment and life. If one walks through Brighton Beach s/he will notice that it is a completely changed part of New York that doesn’t resemble anything American and that’s due to the vast immigration trend among the Russians and the Jews that came there. We can directly relate this event to globalization because it shows how a different culture has its direct effect on a foreign community and shapes its business and consumerism ways.

**Mafia Connection**

The structure of the businesses that takes place today at Brighton Beach is mainly due to the presence of the Russian mob, which is a powerful machine that roots itself to the underworld of Russian crime that started its life in the Soviet Union. Most of the companies, restaurants, banks and retail stores stay in business due to backing of the mob and their influence in the community and local government. The Russian mob has
successfully been running their businesses in the Brighton Beach area because of their imposition of fear onto the residents of that community. They use their threatening power to subdue the new émigrés of Brighton Beach under their control, where they can pay minimum rates for the duties performed. The mob can also indirectly involve their employees in certain illegal activity, which may result in run-in with law enforcement agents or the FBI.

The Tri State Joint Organized Soviet Émigré Crime Project or the TSP was created in order to eradicate or at least undermine some factions of the Russian mob at Brighton Beach, which is considered to be the command post of the criminal underworld. The TSP found out that the businessmen linked to the Russian mob operating in Brighton Beach partake in illegal fraudulent activities such as: confidence schemes, making counterfeit credit cards, checks, Immigration and Naturalization Service documents. In addition they are involved in drug paraphernalia markets, including trafficking and street-level sale of drugs. According to research, sources say that Russians have cooperated with some other ethnic groups, such as Colombian drug cartels. The mob also involves itself and its employees (or the citizens of Brighton) in smuggling drugs and drug-related items as well as products like aluminum, weapons, and currency.

Let’s look at a case of mafia members that acted in the neighborhoods around Brighton Beach, which took part in the violent schemes that was later caught by the FBI. This criminal group comprising of several members of Jewish-Russian decent were captured in 2002 and later tried in a Brooklyn Court and sentenced according to their criminal conviction.
According to the indictment and a detention letter filed by the government, the gang, under BARI's leadership, engaged in an ongoing course of escalating violence that began in 2000 with the theft of tens of thousands of dollars from mailboxes in the Brighton Beach community of Brooklyn, and which expanded to include trafficking in MDMA (ecstasy), extortion, loan sharking, the use of extortionate means to collect debts and illegal gambling. Included in the crimes charged are two counts of obstruction of justice, in which it is alleged that the gang threatened and assaulted two witnesses who were believed to be cooperating with law enforcement. The joint FBI-NYPD investigation leading to today's indictment and arrests began more than two years ago and was assisted, in part, by information provided to law enforcement by members of the local Russian community. (www.usdoj.gov)

Globalization Tied to Mafia Activity

Globalization has very similar ties to the mafia activity in New York and especially at Brighton Beach. I say that because mafia presence in this part of the world is directly tied to the immigration wave that happened during the 70’s. Russian Mafia is unique in that they were in the right place at the right time when the Soviet Union collapsed. The fact is that most people who have been associated with Russian organized crime are in fact Jewish. The simple explanation for that is that the people who were allowed to immigrate to the US from the USSR in the latter 1970's were Jews. This was under the special emigration policy that came about through most favorable trade status with the US. They had to let people immigrate to the US in exchange for trade with the US. As a result, most of the immigrants in that period were Jews, and likewise, many
criminals in that group were Jewish. So by setting up trade relations with Russia and letting in a large wave of Jewish émigrés, the United States created a new problem for itself, it established grounds for a well-functioning criminal society to set up base in New York, especially Brighton Beach area.

The Russian mafia has brought with it to New York and other major areas, where it flourishes, a number of traits that are very commonly tied to the Soviet socialist economy and its implementation in their actions and business ventures. This scenario plays itself out very frequently in the criminal activities of the mob, according to James Finckenauer – a Rutgers University professor and author of the book “The Russian Mafia in America”. He says that “Russian immigration is placed in context of earlier immigration waves in the United States and it is shown how these groups became linked with criminal reputations and engaged in varying degrees of actual crime. The roots of the apparent Russian talent for schemes and scams are traced to the predictable outcome of the Soviet socialist economy and the illicit opportunities it provided for evading a bureaucratic and inefficient system.” (Finckenauer, 1998)

Hence, one can see, how a single culture, in this case – Russian criminal culture – became so popular in the outside world due to its powerful ability to spread. The rapid spread of this culture can be closely linked to globalization, because it was a product of a U.S. policy on expanding its trade partnerships with Russia. Something that was only existent in one country became a monster throughout the world once it got a taste of the global market. And the mafia became aware of flavor of the global market right after the fall of the Soviet Union. Once the government weakened its controls over the people and their ability to freely travel and leave the country, mafia members started fleeing the
country in search for new places around the world where they could prosper and plant their criminal seed. One of these areas was Brooklyn, NY, and Brighton Beach was the center of it all.

One of the major negative repercussions that the presence of the mafia brings on the Brighton Beach community is a rise in anti-immigrant activity on behalf of the U.S. government and U.S. citizens. The report, based on a survey of conditions in immigrant communities by twenty-five organizations, finds that immigrants “are increasingly the targets of racial profiling by law enforcement officials” and “are often the victims of hate crimes, where they are targets of civilians acting on racist and xenophobic motives legitimized by the state.” (BBC) The Russian – Jewish immigrants have reported many cases of civil rights abuses on the part of the NYPD due to, what they claim to be, xenophobic attitudes toward immigrant communities like the one at Brighton Beach. Many stores on the Brighton Beach strip have been raided in the past by the joint efforts of the FBI and the NYPD in search of criminal activity within the business. Innocent working people were arrested and some deported back to Russia or the ex-Soviet block countries in the process.

The Russian criminal world at Brighton Beach and in the Tri-State area all together has involved themselves in a harsh violent behavior due to their opposition coming from the legit citizens of this area. One of these defenders of justice is Pat Singer – the Executive Director of the Brighton Neighborhood Association that fights against the domination of the mob in her community. Her efforts have been somewhat successful. She shared this article, which talks about the bullying of the senior citizens and disabled by the mob at Brighton Beach and how it later resulted in the creation of the Brighton
Beach Neighborhood Association, which focuses itself in an attempt to improve on the living conditions of the social aspect of the Brighton Beach community. This is her story:

After about the twelfth mugging on her block, a young mother, a rare breed among so many elderly, decided to fight back. She put out flyers inviting her neighbors to join her and discuss ways to win their community back. At the first lobby meeting 60 residents fearfully showed up. They were told to go back and get five neighbors each and meet again in two days. At that meeting hundreds showed up. Spilling out into Brighton 12th Street.

The young mother, Pat Singer, then told them that together they could make a change in their quality of life. "The only place left for us is the ocean," she let them know, “and it's the wrong time of year to take a swim.” The following Saturday she led these hundreds, which the DAILY NEWS reported to be over 500, in a demonstration at the intersection Brighton Beach Avenue and Coney Island Avenue. It was a passionate demonstration, with most of the participants being elderly, and many physically imparted. The intersection used the "Barns Dance" traffic system, which meant that at one point traffic, was stripped in all directions to make the crossing easier. With the traffic stopped, the demonstrators proceeded with wheel chairs, walkers, canes and their own feet. They held the intersection for four hours. They wanted to make the point that more police were needed to protect this "forgotten generation". Out of this street demonstration, the Brighton Neighborhood Association was born. Today the Brighton Neighborhood Association operates out of two offices. The
intake office is located inside the DIME Saving Bank (1002 Brighton Beach Avenue) and is visited by at least 3,000 residents a year. The administrative office is located inside a storefront at 1121 Brighton Beach Avenue and houses out Youth Division which was initiated in 1980 oversees after school centers, anti-truancy programs and a unique summer school, Second Chance. Second Chance gives youngsters from the 6th, 7th and 8th grades who have been left back an opportunity to move ahead with their peers in September. Since its inception, over 1,500 students have received a second chance. Brighton Beach has been the home for immigrants since the 1900s when the first European Jews settled in this beachfront community. The community. Hummed with the sounds of Yiddish for a number of decades, but one day the children of these first settles grew up and moved out. (Singer, BNA)

**Bright Side of Mafia Presence**

Every time a story is done about the Russian Mafia in the media, the public looks at it as if the future of the community at Brighton Beach is going downhill, but that isn’t exactly the case. If we look at it in depth Brighton Beach business sector has been growing thanks to the presence and influence of the mob. In 1970s Brighton Beach was becoming just another victim of neighborhood deterioration. This new wave of immigrants has turned this ‘Old World’ community around. Apartments are at a premium low and there are few empty or closed down stores as compared to twenty years ago. Who is mainly responsible for the money being put into the purchase of these apartment buildings and stores opening up? The answer lies in the mob. They indirectly provide employment opportunities to the émigrés that seek jobs and are willing to take
anything that is offered to them. Their fluency in Russian helps job seekers receive job opportunities in this area, because the majority of the population communicates in that language. Also, since work and housing is affected by transportation needs, this doesn’t raise any issues for the job seekers of the émigré community at Brighton. That is due to a well-developed system of public transportation, which allows the workers to travel to and from their work. The presence of such transportation utilities doesn’t require the worker to invest in buying his/her own source of transportation, which can be very expensive in an intercity environment.

The majority of the real-estate construction undertaken, which incorporates mafia’s involvement, is there for distinctive money laundering purposes or other types of criminal activity. But still, this involvement in the community creates new labor opportunities for people that live there or intend to move to that area. Another advantage of the mafia presence in Brighton Beach is seen in the large quantity of law firms that have established themselves in that area. Mafiosi need someone to legally protect them in court, and who else is best for the job when you have an enormous pool of Russian and English speaking attorneys that will happily take up the case in court. Whether they win or loose, money is still being made and the neighborhood keeps flourishing, as a result of vast participation and involvement of these law firms in the community of Brighton beach.

We tend to accent the negatives when we should be glorifying the positives. This problem is pervasive in all immigrant communities today, which keeps us from communicating and trusting one another. New York is just not Manhattan. The 'Big Apple' is made up of many communities and many people mostly immigrants who have
come to this country to make a life for themselves and their families. It is this kind of courage and fortitude that built this city in the early 1900s and will see it through the new millennium.

**Housing**

In my online research of the activities undertaken by Pat Singer – the Executive Director of the Brighton Neighborhood association, I learned about numerous problems and lack of services that the community of Brighton Beach faces today. These problems might be a concern for the future of the population living there.

*We have one full-time Russian Speaking and one part-time English speaking person for an intake office that sees hundreds of residents each month.*

*We need additional staffing. Part of our problem as a C.B.O. is finding available grant sources then needing technical assistance in writing the grants, as we are so limited in staffing. Grant writing has become a field within itself. Groups with more income can afford to hire grant-writers or they keep one on staff.*

*Our C.B.O. is handicapped in this area. On a positive note... we have found in addressing building-wide issues that Tenant-Landlord Forums are more effective than dragging people to court. If a landlord is willing to sit down with a small representative group from the tenants with the C.B.O. as arbitrator, the likelihood of coming to a meeting of the minds exists as opposed to an impersonal court environment. Besides court actions are known to be delayed deliberately to wear down the tenants.* (Singer, BNA)

*Rents are sky high in this "Old world" community because of the rent laws that allow for an increase every time a tenant moves. With the immigrants’ population*
climbing the economic level, frequent moves are being made. A one bedroom in a pre-World WAR II building is now $850 and two bedrooms are going for $1,000 and better.

Senior housing in most cases have long waiting lists. We need more units in an aging population. SROs in Brighton Beach, a legacy of our past when Boarding Houses were popular have turned into a cancer that could destroy our community. We see drugs, prostitution prevalent in these properties, which are owned by absentee landlords who take advantage of the supply and demand situation.

Private homes integrated with the SROs are not being sought by outside investors because of the criminal element. The SROs being wood framed and holding too many occupants are an endangerment to the tenants and the adjacent housing.

(Pat Singer, BNA)

Here we see how these issues have major negative connotations on the living costs and conditions of the Brighton residents today resulting in a desire to move out of the area into less expensive neighborhoods either of New York, the Tri-State area, or elsewhere in the US. This means that the area, which was left behind might be abandoned by businessmen and entrepreneurs, causing more people to flee. Big business’ will ride in and establish them selves as is happening for the most part throughout little communities in the US today. The social identity of the Russian – American community will be lost. And furthermore the lively and bustling strip that is Brighton Beach today will become another secluded, lonely, ‘Old World’ beach community as it was two decades ago. Let’s hope that this will not occur.
This negative aspect of the impeding problem that takes place in Brighton Beach is, in my opinion, directly linked to globalization. I see this as being an example of outsourcing – the process that involves big or small business closing down and either moving abroad or to far away regions to seek cheaper production costs and/or inexpensive facilities. I see the lack of housing in this area as a major problem that may undermine the community and businesses that revolve around it in the future. If new measures of housing construction aren’t drawn in, then Brighton Beach might as well be a dead community in due time. But these types of new housing projects are already being constructed, just take the example of the Oceana apartment complexes that are being built right on the boardwalk of Brighton Beach with their balconies exiting the beautiful ocean view. Oceana is a recently built condominium complex that has been improving the quality of real estate and the look of Brighton Beach community. There is, however, one thing that makes this story a little bit controversial in the eyes of people like Pat Singer, who would plead for development of cheap apartment complexes, which senior citizens and individuals pertaining to the low-middle class could afford. The controversy lies in the price of these condominium apartments. They range from a premium of $515,000 to $1,350,000. “Located in the exclusive east enclave, these residences feature the prestige, the privacy, and the views you have been waiting for. Views vary from beautiful Club Oceana to trees and a quiet streetscape to the dazzling beach and gorgeous Atlantic Ocean. Already 95% Sold!” (www.oceanausa.com)

Projects such as the Oceana are there for a good reason. These complexes would not go up, unless there weren’t demand for them. The demand comes from the presence of a wealthy elite that in its ranks holds a vast number of mafia members. If this elite
begins investing in the construction of such housing complexes then soon, what we’ll see is an expansion of beautiful ocean side, hotel-looking housing and the Brighton Beach area will be another upscale, rich neighborhood that hopefully will not lose its Russian-Jewish identity.

**Conclusion**

The are over 150 million people that are going through the process of immigration every year. These individuals are major contributors to demographic shifting in countries throughout the world. But, at the same time, we can see how globalization impacts migrant-receiving countries, such as in the United States. Globalization definitely stirs up economic uncertainties and heightened racial and anti-immigrant hostilities as predominantly white native populations seek economic security. The tensions created between the migrant-receiving governments and the migrants themselves have resulted in formation of such criminal factions as the Russian mafia, which predominantly rules the criminal underworld in various regions of the United States and elsewhere in the world. That is why political pressures have brought about greater restrictions on immigration as well as on the rights of current immigrants. The final cause of this criminal activity uprising is the increase in immigration enforcement resources and practices. In turn these policies and practices have further stigmatized migrants and fueled anti-immigrant activity and institutional discrimination, particularly against those without immigration documents.
Bibliography

• Finchenauer O. James; Waring, Elin “The Russian Mafia in America” Northeastern University Press, 1998

• Gillison, Douglas “Close-up on Brighton Beach, Brooklyn” NY Mirror, May 1st, 2003


• Schwarzbaum, Leon “Brighton Beach: Little Odessa by the Sea” www.manhattah-hotel-reservations.com/brighton.beach.html

• Singer, Pat. Brighton Neighborhood Association. www.brightonbeach.com


• PBS News. “Ivankov: A closer Look” April, 2001

• www.oceanausa.com