

Igor Strelkov: Moscow Agent or Military Romantic?

Written by David R. Marples

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DAVID R. MARPLES, JUL 22 2017

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On 11 June 2014, the self-proclaimed mayor of Slaviansk, Vyacheslav Ponomarev, was placed under arrest for actions inconsistent with his duties, most notably unwarranted spending of money.[1] The order to remove him was given by the military commander of the separatist forces of the so-called Donetsk People's Republic, Igor Strelkov (Girkin), and highlighted his consolidation of authority over various rivals. The Ukrainian Security Service (Sluzhba Bezpeky Ukrainy, or SBU) insists that Strelkov takes his orders directly from Moscow. But how true is this? Who is Strelkov and what is his background and outlook? The question has intrigued many observers and analysts of the crisis in Ukraine, which has shown little sign of abating since the presidential election of 25 May and the installation of businessman Petro Poroshenko as the new president of Ukraine on 7 June. It sparked the interest, inter alia, of the Investigative Journalism blog site 'Investigate This!' which has provided several helpful articles and transcripts of interviews in recent days. Not surprisingly there has also been some interest in the Russian media, particularly that of the far right, where Strelkov, generally, is regarded as a hero figure, one prepared to sacrifice his life to the cause of the Russian state and its future. And certainly, the Ukrainian media, the Ukrainian authorities, and the European Union have all taken an interest in this enigmatic figure, regarding him as an enemy, a terrorist, and a criminal responsible for several high-profile killings.

On 29 April, the EU then expanded its list of sanctioned Russians who were posing threats to Ukraine's independence, and it included Strelkov in their number. At this time, separatist forces in Slaviansk were holding captive seven representatives of the OSCE, and it was proving difficult to negotiate their release. Strelkov was described as an active officer of the Russian Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU).[2] Writing for the *Moscow Times*, in a withering article on separatist leaders in Ukraine, Ivan Nechepurenko described Strelkov as 'a Russian civil war romantic' and based on materials found on the Anonymous International hacker group, claimed that he served for the Federal Security Service (FSB) of Russia in Chechnya between 1999 and 2005.[3] Thus the conclusion could be derived that Strelkov works or has worked for both the FSB and GRU, a somewhat unusual distinction.

The (Almost) Complete Picture

It should be added that few such allegations can be definitively authenticated and much is based on speculation. But it is possible to piece together fragments that provide some suggestion of the complete picture. Writers for the Russian ultra-rightist military newspaper *Voennoe obozrenie* have also delved into Strelkov's past, making no secret of their admiration for the military leader of separatist Donbas. Writing on 20 May, Roman Skoromokhov begins with a depiction of 'The man who emerged out of nowhere and for some time has attracted everyone's attention' and notes the various allegations about his affiliation. First of all, the author comments, is his name, or more precisely two names: Ivan Vsevolodovich Girkin and Ivan Ivanovich Strelkov, the first the birth name and the second obviously a pseudonym.

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Ivan Girkin, continues the author, was born in Moscow – some sources say he was born on 17 December 1970[4] and graduated from the Moscow State Historical Archives as an historian before entering the armed forces for his military service from June 1993 to July 1994. Prior to that, however, he had evidently served in Transnistria in June-July 1992 and Bosnia, from November 1992 to March 1993,[5] which raises questions about the duration of his academic training.

Skoromokhov reveals that the soldier was also a diarist and published a 'Bosnian Diary' in another far-right Russian newspaper *Zavtra* under the name 'Igor G'. In Bosnia Strelkov became acquainted with another figure prominent in the events in Donbas, Aleksandr Boroday.[6] Girkin/Strelkov served in both Chechen campaigns, though there is some contention about his military rank, i.e. whether he is a captain or a colonel.

Skoromokhov has some doubts about both rankings, observing that sixteen years of service is rather long for a captain, but may not be enough to achieve the position of colonel. He notes that some sources suggest Girkin/Strelkov visited the Middle East, which is confirmed indirectly by his frequent writings and comments on the Arab Spring and deep knowledge of Libya and Egypt (and also, it transpires, especially of Syria). By August 1999 he was writing – now as Strelkov – along with Boroday as a special correspondent for *Zavtra* from the Kadar zone in Daghestan, where Ministry of Internal Affairs troops were conducting a 'cleansing' of several villages inhabited by Wahhabi Muslims.[7]

In addition to writing for *Zavtra*, Strelkov also worked as a correspondent for the separatist Abkhazia Network News Agency (ANNA). One can thus see a clearly discernible pattern of Strelkov's presence in areas of the world of geostrategic and military interest to Russia, contrasting between states in which the incumbent government was threatened (Middle East) or those in which Russia had a clearly defined position of supporting a breakaway region (Transnistria and Abkhazia).

His writing for ANNA makes no secret of the links between the various events, which Strelkov perceived as of deep concern to the future of Russia. Writing with the by-line 'colonel in the reserves', he expressed his fear that in Russia there could be developing a situation similar to that in Syria, where Sunni Muslims, representing the vast majority of the population wage a war against a leadership that represents only 10% of inhabitants. In Russia, ethnic Russians are likewise declining in numbers and this it may be necessary to take radical action to preserve the state against 'radical Islam', resorting if necessary to methods that infringe on human rights.[8]

Skoromokhov's article reveals another side of Strelkov, namely his love for military role-playing and re-enactment of battles. Following the article there are a number of photographs of the separatists' leader in uniforms of civil war generals (generals of the White Army, it should be noted), as a Cossack, and in a suit of armour.[9]

Other facets of his personality are worth noting. He has an ex-wife and children still living in Moscow.[10] His appearance and demeanour are very different from the Ukrainian separatist leaders that have emerged since the spring. He is the antithesis of a gangster or revolver-touting thug. He looks and has probably cultivated the image of a military officer of an earlier generation, with short hair and clipped moustache, complementing his 'little green man' military fatigues; he is quiet-spoken, calm, and – his extreme political views notwithstanding – highly intelligent. His writing is lucid and arguments clear. And what may make him unusually dangerous is a clear belief in his mission, which currently is to consolidate his authority in Donetsk and Luhansk, but in the longer term, to remove the Kyiv government from power.

A Fanatical Romantic

A second article about Strelkov in *Voennoe obozrenie* appeared on 12 June, authored by Kolya Taraskin, essentially in the form of lament concerning his *non-recognition* by some of the remaining liberal sectors of the Russian media. Taraskin maintains that there are many lies circulating about Strelkov, including his membership in the GRU and KGB. Behind the polite 'romance re-enactor', he declares, 'are rigorous years of service' and direct participation in at least four armed conflicts in recent years. His feat, he adds, holding off the 'entire Ukrainian army' for a month with several hundred volunteers is comparable to the defence of the Brest Fortress in 1941, 'but no one cares'.

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Just as Soviet history removed from textbooks details of major victories by the tsarist armies, so today Strelkov's feats in Slaviansk are underrated. The author takes issue with the 'red-headed broadcaster' for *Ekho Moskvy* (presumably Yulia Latynina) for praising the successes of the 'gallant Mujahideen' in the North Caucasus and the depictions of vodka-swilling Russian mercenaries in Syria. These same 'drunken mercenaries', he claims, 'are protecting Slaviansk' under the leadership of 'Uncle Igor'. His depiction of how Strelkov's troops contrast with the images of Russian mercenaries circulating borders on racism but is worth quoting if only to demonstrate the writer's emotions:

They are not posing with rubber dolls and bottles, they do not squander dollars in bars with hot negresses. They calmly, without the hysterical hatred of their enemies, and trusting in God, look death in the eye without blinking.[11]

Returning to Strelkov's biography, his earlier sojourns in war zones were followed by his arrival in Crimea, where he reportedly played a key role in capturing the parliament building, installing his friend Sergey Aksyonov as Prime Minister, and eliminating SBU agents, officers of the Ukrainian General Staff, and 'spies from the OSCE', as Skoromokhov describes them.[12] He then took the bulk of his forces from Crimea directly into eastern Ukraine to fight against the interim Ukrainian government established in Kyiv after the flight of former president Viktor Yanukovich.

The inference is evident: a Russian officer, whether in the reserves or active, took an active role in the annexation of Crimea and ostensibly has tried to do the same thing, with less success, in eastern Ukraine. Is this proof of the direct involvement of Russia in Strelkov's operations? That certainly seems to be the case. In addition, he has now demonstrated his growing authority by removing Ponomarev. The answer, however, remains somewhat ambivalent because at present he lacks the support of the Russian president and appears to be operating as a lone wolf.

By Whose Authority?

In an interview with the newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda* on 26 April,[13] Strelkov stated that to date Russia had not supplied any weapons for his forces and that he was thus reliant on weapons seized from the locality. His forces were hardened veterans, mostly from Ukraine, who had fought in the Russian army in Chechnya and Central Asia, as well as in Iraq and Yugoslavia with the Ukrainian army. Until the recent crossing of the eastern border of Ukraine by Russian tanks,[14] there had been little evidence of any firm commitment of the Russian authorities to the forces of Strelkov.

The question, in any case, is somewhat redundant in that Strelkov has no tolerance whatsoever for the existence of an independent Ukraine, let alone respect for its elected leaders. He represents rather the forces of imperial Russia, with or without the backing of Vladimir Putin. The latter figure understandably says little about Strelkov, but much about the assault of the Ukrainian Anti-Terrorist forces on 'peaceful citizens' in the Ukrainian East.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to dismiss all the evidence provided by the SBU and other sources of Strelkov taking orders from superiors. He does not operate with complete independence, and it would be far-fetched to anticipate that an officer with such long military service in world trouble spots would dispense with military hierarchy. He may be part of the Greater Russian vision that permeates some sections of the Russian establishment, from political scientist Aleksandr Dugin to Vasily Yakemenko and harkens back to earlier luminaries such as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn.

Strelkov appears to live in a different era, but his play roles have become confused with reality. Eventually, this quiet and eccentric fanatic may represent little more than a pawn in a much broader power game, but for the Ukrainian government he represents a difficult opponent who is unlikely to surrender, with or without support from the Russian military and its commander-in-chief.

Notes

[1] https://sputniknews.com/voiceofrussia/news/2014_06_13/Vladimir-Pavlenko-appointment-new-mayor-of-Slavyansk-3417/

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- [2] https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/eu-issues-new-round-of-sanctions-on-russia/2014/04/29/3b766ebe-cf80-11e3-a6b1-45c4dffb85a6_story.html?utm_term=.6f580d3848ea
- [3] <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/santa-for-hire-soapmaker-run-insurgency-in-ukraines-east-35496>
- [4] See, for example, <https://vk.com/slavstrelkov>
- [5] <https://topwar.ru/48026-portrety-veka-igor-strelkov.html>
- [6] See also Catherine Fitzpatrick's analysis at: <http://www.interpretermag.com/is-separatist-colonel-strelkov-the-kremlins-wag-the-dog-gone-out-of-bounds/>
- [7] <https://topwar.ru/48026-portrety-veka-igor-strelkov.html>
- [8] <http://old.anna-news.info/node/11634>
- [9] <http://www.kp.ru/daily/26225/3108701/>
- [10] <http://www.businessinsider.com/r-elusive-muscovite-with-three-names-takes-control-of-ukraine-rebels-2014-15>
- [11] <https://topwar.ru/51580-voyska-dyadi-igorya.html>
- [12] <https://topwar.ru/48026-portrety-veka-igor-strelkov.html>
- [13] <http://www.kp.ru/daily/26225.7/3107725/>
- [14] <http://uainfo.org/blognews/339354-rossiyskie-tanki-v-ukraine-aktualizirovali-vopros-vvedeniya-novyh-sankciy-protiv-rf.html>

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