

Foreigners Fighting for Ukraine in 6 Profiles

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July 23, 2014



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From Lord Byron to Che Guevara, warfare has always had a way of attracting foreign activists passionate enough to fight and die for their respective causes.

The conflict in eastern Ukraine is no exception. But the foreigners involved are no Comandante Che. Rather, the conflict has tended to attract the likes of European ultra-rightwingers on one side, and Russian imperialists on the other.

The Moscow Times has selected the three most colorful foreign warriors on each side to provide our readers with a crash course in the types of people that would opt for machine guns, sniper rifles and the front lines of Donetsk and Luhansk as the most appropriate means by which to defend their ideals.

The Ukrainian Army:

1. Mikael Skilt, Sweden

A retired army sniper, 37-year-old Skilt is a member of Svenskarnas Parti, a Swedish neo-Nazi party. According to the BBC, he opposes "racial mixing" and campaigns in Ukraine to support his "white brothers." Up next on his world tour is Syria, where he reportedly plans to join up with strongman Bashar Assad to help him combat "international Zionism."

2. Francesco "Don" Fontana, Italy

The 53-year-old Fontana has reportedly been fighting the Communist menace since the Years of Lead, a street war between the ultra-right and the radical left in Italy between the 1960s and 1980s. These days, he is better known as a Kalashnikov-toting trooper who has joined leagues with Ukraine's nationalist Right Sector group. Daily newspaper Il Giornale reported that Fontana's grandmother, the matriarch of the family, idolized Italian dictator Benito Mussolini, and that Fontana himself has always wanted to avenge the death of his grandfather, who was slain in southern Russia by the Red Army during World War II.

3. Gaston Besson, France

Besson, 47, recruits foreign volunteers for the Ukrainian army. According to Polish newspaper Rzeczpospolita, the ex-paratrooper and self-proclaimed "anarchist individualist" also heads an association of foreign veterans that fought the Croatian war of 1991-1995, the bulk of whom were neo-Nazi sympathizers, including from the French Foreign Legion.

The Rebels:

1. Igor Girkin aka Strelkov, Russia

Girkin, a retired FSB officer also linked to the GRU intelligence agency, fought in Transdnestr, Bosnia and Chechnya. For some Russians, he is the closest thing to a national hero the country has had since Yuriy Gagarin. A historian by education, 43-year-old Girkin whiles away peaceful times shooting imaginary weapons: He is an avid historical re-enactor, with a particular penchant for the imperial army troops of World War I and the anti-Bolshevik forces of the Russian Civil War.

2. Alexander "Babai" Mozhayev, Russia

Atop his square frame, he sports an epic beard, police sunglasses and a Kalashnikov. He leads a unit of Cossacks, a quasi-warrior caste seen as the spetsnaz of the tsarist era. He owes his nom de guerre, Babai, to a Russian fairytale bogeyman and is rumored to have killed U.S. mercenaries and shot down gunships. Mozhayev, 36, has the general appearance of a comic-book character. Even the attempted murder charges currently pending against him at home in Russia have done little to dim his popularity: He is the star of a thousand online memes.

3. Chechen volunteers, Russia

Nobody knows who they are, or how many of them are out there, but even Chechen strongman Ramzan Kadyrov has admitted that volunteers from the North Caucasus republic, where an anti-Russian insurgency has simmered for 15 years, are now flocking to join a pro-Russian rebellion in Ukraine. Talk about fortunes of war.

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Original url:

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