The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

'Ukrainian Rebels' Aren't Ukrainian or Rebels

By Casey Michel

July 28, 2014

As we slowly move beyond the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17, it is gradually becoming clearer that the likelihood of a proper international investigation, unimpeded by external actors, has all but evaporated. There have been numerous reports of separatists tampering with the crash site, denying international investigators access to the crash and even raiding bodies of cash and other valuables.

But where the separatists have likely stolen any chance to determine for sure who destroyed MH17, they have, through their blundering exploits, allowed us to remind ourselves of who these men are, of what they want and of what they are willing to do. And most of all, they have allowed us an opportunity to examine just where they come from.

Unfortunately, in the blitz of media coverage since the crash, a handful of outlets continue to label the separatists fighting in Donetsk and Luhansk as "Ukrainian rebels."

But if the annihilation of MH17 ends in anything, it should be the realization that these men

are neither "Ukrainian" nor "rebels." Rather than Ukrainian citizens carrying a legitimate grievance against the Kiev government's pro-EU outlook, they are outsiders and usurpers, men with either mercenary or imperial motivations.

They are pro-Russian, yes. They are separatists. But these men are invaders — and they are not Ukrainians.

Just look at the leadership structure of those who purport to fight for Novorossia, a large area of land in east and southeast Ukraine once ruled by Russia.

Igor Strelkov, considered commander-in-chief of the self-declared Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and the Luhansk People's Republic (LPR), maintains Russian citizenship. In addition to having a Russian intelligence background, either in the Federal Security Service or the Main Intelligence Directorate, Strelkov loves to re-enact famous Russian battles and appears to see himself in the tradition of Russian tsarist officers.

Alexander Borodai, meanwhile, carries the self-appointed mantle of prime minister of the Donetsk People's Republic. He sought to speak on behalf of the separatists last week, handing off the black boxes from MH17 that he and his troops had found, swaggering as Malaysian officials referred to him as "his excellency." And yet Borodai is simply another Russian, an interloper rather than an local.

And then there's Vladimir Antyufeyev, the new deputy prime minister in eastern Ukraine. Antyufeyev carries a peculiar, disconcerting legacy. Before coming to Ukraine he held security roles in the breakaway states of Transdnestr and Abkhazia, pro-Russian separatist regions in Moldova and Georgia respectively. Like Putin, Strelkov and Borodai, Antyufeyev is a Russian citizen.

But it is not simply that Russian citizens riddle the leadership ranks of these separatists, drowning local grievances and eliminating any local stake in the movement. Rather, it is that the actual troops fighting, while undoubtedly including within their ranks plenty of Ukrainian citizens, are a compendium of post-Soviet citizenships.

Mercenary Uzbeks have been observed multiple times among the fighters, and there are unconfirmed reports of Kazakhs acting on behalf of the rebels. A reporter from Radio Free Europe even went so far as to pose as an Uzbek interested in volunteering. Recruiters for the DPR in Moscow replied that they would heartily welcome the volunteer, but that the lack of a Russian passport could pose a problem. The lack of Ukrainian citizenship? Not so much.

The Vostok Battalion, among the more professional of the various armed brigands, made headlines when its Chechen fighters first appeared in eastern Ukraine. Ossetians, likewise, have been spotted fighting in what they hope will be Novorossia.

Although some are undoubtedly motivated by mercenary inclinations, many non-Ukrainians are there for more than money. An Armenian citizen recruited through the separatists' Moscow office, who has since left the ranks of the separatists, said that he was "fighting for [the Soviet Union]." A Turkmen national, swathed in Soviet regalia, was filmed a few days later saying much the same thing. Those leading and arming the invasion force are not fighting for the rights of ethnic minorities or for democratic self-determination, values that

ethnic Russians native to eastern Ukraine might reasonably fight for. They are fighting for a nostalgic vision of empire.

And it is not just those fighting in Ukraine who see the conflict as a fight for empire. A friend of mine, an ethnic Russian in northern Kazakhstan, recently referred to these men in eastern Ukraine as "our guys." I tried to remind him that this was 2014, and that he, a Kazakhstani citizen, had no legitimate claim to any of the fighters in Ukraine.

It did not matter, though. Because, for a certain sector of the post-Soviet populace, 1991 never happened. For this group, nostalgic for the Soviet Union, the men in eastern Ukraine are rebels and freedom fighters, rather than the Russian-led, Russian-backed marauders that the West and the Ukrainian government recognizes them to be.

But the West should not help them out by labeling them as "Ukrainian rebels." Only a handful of these men are Ukrainian. And given their either mercenary or imperial motivations, they are closer to invaders by definition than "rebels." Following on the heels of a contaminated, compromised crash investigation into MH17, calling them what they really are is the least we can do.

Casey Michel is a Bishkek-based journalist and a graduate student at Columbia University's Harriman Institute. He can be followed on Twitter at @cjcmichel.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/07/28/ukrainian-rebels-arent-ukrainian-or-rebels-a37754