

Russian Nationalist Writer Creates Battalion To 'Liberate' Ukraine

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Russian writer Zakhar Prilepin **Maxim Shemetov / TASS**

Ever since fighting broke out in the summer of 2014, the Ukrainian conflict has attracted a range of colorful characters — from idealists through to violent criminals. Thousands have died, some have left, others have left their minds.

But with fighting once again flaring up in the Donbass, it seems a new character is eager to enter the fray. His name is Zakhar Prilepin, and he is a famous Russian writer.

In an interview published by the Komsomolskaya Pravda daily on Feb. 13, Prilepin announced the formation of a volunteer battalion in the self-declared People's Republic of Donetsk, one of two breakaway regions in eastern Ukraine.

“Literature is not the reason I am here,” Prilepin said during the interview. “The division was created on my initiative. We will ride on a white horse into any town we've abandoned.”

Prilepin's reference to "abandoned" towns presumably includes towns beyond current

contact lines.

A nationalist writer and a longstanding member of the banned National Bolshevik Party, Prilepin came to prominence during the 1990s. He was a riot police (OMON) officer, and then served several combat tours during the first Chechen war and associated conflicts. In 2000, Prilepin turned his hand to writing and journalism, working for publications across the political spectrum. In 2010, he signed a letter to Putin urging him to stand down, but in 2014 reconsidered his views and is now an ardent Kremlin loyalist.

Though he founded the battalion, Prilepin is not first, but second in command. He holds the rank of major within the group, an unrecognized military unit.

Asked by the interviewer if taking up arms somehow compromised his status as a writer, Prilepin was unapologetic. "I am an officer," he said, "here I do not consider myself to be a writer."

Many famous writers fought in World War Two, Prilepin continued: "All of these amazing comrades like [Soviet writers] Konstantin Simonov and Yevgeny Dolmatovsky. They all wrote. They all carried arms. They all had ranks."

The Kremlin has traditionally distanced itself from Russian nationals fighting in Ukraine. The evidence, however, indicates that at various points during the conflict, such fighters were encouraged and assisted in joining the fight.

Speaking at a daily briefing on Monday, Feb. 13,. Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov told journalists he would not comment on the Prilepin's motivation.

"Russian citizens follow their hearts and go to these unrecognized republics. I can only state this as a fact," he said.

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