



Russia's Man in New Type War - Igor Girkin

Ray Finch

Open Source, Foreign Perspective, Underconsidered/Understudied Topics

RUSSIA'S MAN IN NEW TYPE WAR-IGOR GIRKIN

Introduction

When the Kremlin leadership decided to annex Crimea and support separatist elements in SE Ukraine in early 2014, it appealed to, stoked, and relied upon Russian nationalist sentiments for support. The Kremlin-sponsored media portrayed the conflict with Ukraine as Russians helping their compatriots defend these regions from the new “fascist” government in Kiev. Those who initially showed up to support the Kremlin’s objective of seizing the Crimea and stoking separatist sentiments in the Donbas region were a motley group, comprised of both official and unofficial volunteers. Various Russian Special Forces, combined with regular units from the military, FSB and other security agencies mixed with Cossack, biker groups and unofficial para-military organizations moved to secure the Crimean Peninsula and then wreak separatist havoc in SE Ukraine.

One of the primary ringleaders in shaping the situation in Crimea and fomenting separatism in SE Ukraine was the ex-military/FSB, nationalist author, and historical re-enactor, Igor Girkin, who had earlier adopted the nom de guerre of “Strelkov” (Shooter or Marksman). This brief paper will provide a short biographical sketch of Girkin, examine his actions during the initial phase of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict (January-August 2014) and the role he plays today within the Russian political landscape.¹ The thesis of the paper revolves around the assertion that the nationalist sentiments unleashed by the Kremlin after it seized Crimea and sparked conflict in SE Ukraine, have long since metastasized into a dangerous phenomenon, perhaps best personified by someone like Igor Girkin.

Girkin’s (Strelkov’s) Background

For the past 25 years, Igor Girkin has been involved in both real and imaginary battles to defend Russian interests. In some of these real-life battles he may have been a freelancer; while in others he was following Kremlin orders. The precise details of Girkin’s background are as opaque as the confusion which swept over Russia in the 1990s. Girkin just turned 21 when the USSR collapsed, and like many other patriotic Russians, grieved at the loss of superpower status. Having graduated from college with a degree in historical archives, his mental empire, however, appears to have been less Soviet and more Tsarist.

While the specifics are sketchy, in June 1992, Girkin and a friend made their way to the Transdneistria region of Moldova. Tensions had risen between this largely pro-Russian enclave and the Moldovan authorities over the political status of the Transdneistria region (whether it would remain part of Moldova or become part of Russia). Assigned to a volunteer Cossack unit, Girkin experienced his baptism by fire, allegedly helping the pro-Russian forces in gaining quasi-independence from Moldova.

Having found the smell of gunpowder appealing, a couple of months later, Girkin was fighting alongside pro-Serbian forces in Bosnia. Yugoslavia had come apart at the nationalist seams and Girkin felt compelled to assist Russia's traditional ally protect, and perhaps expand their ethnic presence within the region. Girkin would later write a short pamphlet describing his martial exploits, highlighting, despite whatever obstacles, the importance of fighting for Russian interests.² Using yet another pseudonym, Girkin would also periodically contribute nationalist-themed articles to the ultra-conservative Russian newspaper *Den' [Day]*, later rebranded as *Zavtra [Tomorrow]*.³

Girkin returned to Russia in the Spring of 1993 to complete his mandatory military obligation in the Russian military. Having completed college, Girkin was only required to serve for one year. These were tough times for Russia, where the country's economic strains were felt particularly hard by those in uniform. According to one report, Girkin served as a rifleman from June 1993-July 1994 in a supply unit in the Moscow military district. Some eight months later, he was back in uniform, having volunteered to serve as a deputy platoon commander for an artillery unit deployed to Chechnya. Girkin remained with this unit until late 1995, when he apparently began training for the Federal Security Service (FSB), although some claim that he was hired by the GRU (military intelligence).⁴ Whatever his affiliation, the 1994-96 conflict in Chechnya was not the most glorious period for those wearing a Russian military uniform.

Just about the time the Khasyavurt Accords were signed in August 1996, which ended major hostilities between Russian and Chechen forces (until 1999), Girkin was now employed by the FSB. For the next 17 years (until 2013), he would work in various departments, spending considerable time in the North Caucasus fighting terrorism. He allegedly was wounded in battle and received honors for bravery. Like many of his uniformed comrades, Girkin probably approved of President Putin's determination to restore the Kremlin's mandate within Chechnya. Time permitting, Girkin continued to participate in various historical re-enactments, particularly those Russian Civil War battles, where he could don the uniform of a White Officer battling the Reds.



Strelkov in WW II reenactment. Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Red_Army_WW2_Reenacting.jpg
Youtube-CC-BY

Just as there are questions as to whether Girkin was working for the FSB or the GRU, so the reasons for retiring from military service remains unclear. According to one source, in July 2012 he was moved into the reserves and then laid off in March 2013 due to a reorganization. Girkin has claimed that since he had served for so long within the North Caucasus (where time served for combat deployments can be increased by a factor of three), he had actually reached retirement age as a colonel. Regardless, he shed his government uniform and soon found employment as a security consultant for the conservative oligarch, Konstantin Malofeev.⁵

Girkin's Role in Ukraine

It's not altogether clear how, when, or under which auspices, Girkin showed up in Crimea in February 2014. According to one account, Girkin had earlier spent time observing events in Kiev as the Maidan protests began to escalate. There's no question, however, that he played an important role in organizing local defense forces and helping to weaken the Ukrainian authorities in Crimea, particularly around the city of Simferopol in February-March 2014. According to one biographical article, Girkin helped to form "a special volunteer battalion, which took part in many missions aimed at giving power back to the people of Crimea." He also served as an advisor to the Kremlin-appointed leader of annexed Crimea, Sergey Aksenov.

The next chapter of Girkin's biography is perhaps the most problematic, as he claims that he was acting independently when he travelled in mid-April 2014, with some fifty fighters from Crimea and seized the town of Slaviansk in the Donetsk region of SE Ukraine. Given the logistics and level of support he received, these claims ring false. Anti-Maidan protests had broken out earlier in the region, as many of the ethnic Russian inhabitants did not support the new pro-Western government in Kiev. There were hopes among some within the Kremlin that the protests against the new pro-West government in Kiev would quickly spread and deepen in Eastern Ukraine (where large numbers of ethnic Russians lived). While the Ukrainian authorities were able to assuage separatist movements elsewhere in SE Ukraine, they proved unable to suppress the more violent protests in Donetsk and Luhansk regions. These protests were supported and aggravated by the likes of Girkin and other Russian volunteers. From mid-April until early July 2014, Girkin and his men fought to control and enlarge the territory the controlled around the small city of Slaviansk, located some 70 miles from Donetsk.

Given the general confusion of the new Ukrainian government and the considerable pro-Russian sentiment among some of the locals, Girkin initially enjoyed considerable success in forming local defense forces. By mid-May 2014, Girkin was now being referred to as the "Minister of Defense of the Donetsk People's Republic," having set up his headquarters in the strategically important town of Slaviansk. Not only did this town serve as an important transport junction, but its very name highlighted the fight to "protect the Slavs."

While relatively unknown prior to his arrival in Donetsk, Girkin soon became a prominent face in the Russian media, symbolizing the country's determination to defend co-patriots from the new "fascist" government in Kiev. The Kremlin-supported media worked overtime to enhance his image while discrediting those on the Ukrainian side. Some within the Russian media compared the defense of Slaviansk to that of Stalingrad.⁶ Girkin was portrayed as the noble Russian (volunteer) officer defending the locals against rapacious Ukrainian terrorists who enjoyed crucifying small children.⁷ The reality, however, was much different.

Girkin may have been nominally in charge of pro-Russian forces in the Donetsk region, but the disparate groups of fighters each had their own priority—many of them tied to criminal activity. Girkin was able to somewhat unify these forces with either Russian-supplied equipment and promises that the Kremlin would soon be sending additional resources. He also, allegedly, resorted to using deadly force to instill some sense of discipline within the separatist ranks.⁸

While they continued to provide hybrid support to the separatist movement, the Kremlin leadership had apparently adopted a "wait and see" approach to the developments in SE Ukraine. Before openly committing significant resources, they likely wanted to measure the strength of the separatist cause among the locals and the response of the wider international community. There may also have been concerns as to how the 'Novorossiia' project was being interpreted among those doing the fighting.⁹ Some of the true believers were suggesting that an oligarch-free, truly democratic Novorossiia could serve as a model for a wider Russian renewal.¹⁰

The Ukrainian response in suppressing these separatist revolts was initially quite haphazard. The new government, as well as the security structures and military, were in disarray. Moreover, within the separatist regions, many within law enforcement harbored pro-Russian sentiments. By early July 2014, however, the Ukrainian military, bolstered by volunteers, began to regain separatist controlled territory and were closing in on the city of Slaviansk. Although Girkin had earlier claimed that he would never give up the city, once it became clear that the Russian military was not going to openly come to the aid of the separatists, he decided in early July to retreat and set up operations in the regional capital of Donetsk. He would later justify this move by claiming that if had not pulled back from Slaviansk when he did, Ukrainian forces would have been able to seize the city of Donetsk.¹¹

While Girkin had become a household name in Russia, it wasn't until the downing of Malaysian Air Flight #17 (MH-17) over Ukraine that he earned international notoriety. In response to greater use of Ukrainian air assets, the separatists had been supplied with increasingly sophisticated Air Defense systems. Just days prior to the destruction of MH-17, the separatists had shot down both a heavy Ukrainian military transport and fighter aircraft. On 17 July, believing that they had shot down another Ukrainian military transport aircraft, Girkin boasted on social media that the separatists had again taught the Ukrainian military to stay away from their territory. Once it became clear that they instead had destroyed a civilian airliner with 298 passengers on board, the role of Girkin

and his Russian support came under greater scrutiny of the international community.¹² Girkin would last another month in Donetsk before being recalled to Moscow.

The fallout from the downing of MH-17 may have been the proximate cause of Girkin's dismissal, but the Kremlin may have also been concerned with his growing popularity and his appeals for greater Russian military involvement. The Kremlin media had portrayed the separatist cause as a fight between the forces of good and evil, and Girkin was demanding that the Kremlin allocate the necessary forces to actually secure and annex that region in Ukraine which was once referred to as Novorossiia. The Kremlin's unwillingness to escalate their involvement to the level advocated by Girkin could make the Russian leadership appear weak. He needed to be removed from his position of authority.¹³

Where once he had been the darling of the Russian national media, once Girkin returned to Moscow in August 2014, he was relegated to the conservative fringes. For the first year or so, he was actively involved in collecting resources for Russia's volunteer effort in SE Ukraine. However, as the conflict has dragged on, he has become an outspoken critic of the Kremlin's conduct of the war. Unlike the Kremlin, Girkin has acknowledged Russia's military involvement in this conflict and has persistently advocated additional Russian combat power to transform the Novorossiia project into reality. Girkin has openly criticized the Kremlin decision to deploy forces to Syria, suggesting that such a move was a diversionary tactic to wrest concessions from the West over Crimea and Ukraine.¹⁴ As the conflict in SE Ukraine continues to simmer and the economic situation in Russia has further deteriorated, Girkin's criticism has become more strident. While he has pledged to remain officially outside of politics, many of his "Russia as great power" pronouncements have made him an attractive spokesperson for various political parties.¹⁵



Igor Strelkov at the press conference in the Ural State Mining University, Yekaterinburg, March 14, 2015 Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Igor_Ivanovich_Strelkov_Yekaterinburg3.JPG CC BY-SA 4.0

Conclusion

After the Kremlin's annexation of Crimea in early 2014, some within the Russian leadership believed that the same hybrid tactics could be used to annex a large portion of territory in SE Ukraine. They would employ patriotic volunteers like Igor Girkin, alongside "polite green men" and various pro-Russian separatist groups to establish the Kremlin's mandate in what was to be known as Novorossiia. Once it became clear, however, that the Kremlin had miscalculated and that the majority of people living in SE Ukraine would not support such a move, the Kremlin leadership was forced to revise their strategy. While the Novorossiia project has not been fully renounced, the Kremlin may have to settle for a 'frozen conflict' in the Donbas region. Such an approach may ultimately serve to weaken and destabilize the current pro-Western government in Kiev, but it also appears to be weakening Russia.

It has now been over three years since the conflict in SE Ukraine began, and while President Putin continues to enjoy very high approval ratings, the Russian domestic and international situations have become more problematic. The feelings of unity and patriotism which followed Crimea's annexation have been replaced by a growing sense that the country may be moving in the wrong direction. While the Kremlin has had few qualms in suppressing liberal Russian protests, it may face greater challenges with silencing those, such as Igor Girkin, who argue that Russia must be prepared to use force to protect perceived Russian interests. Like many other Russians who have gained combat experience fighting in SE Ukraine (and elsewhere), Igor Girkin knows how to fight back.

¹ While I was unable to verify all the claims in this paper, for some excellent background information on Girkin, see the report titled: "Igor Vsevolodovich Girkin, alias Igor Ivanov Strelkov," accessed 24 April 2017. <http://www.offiziere.ch/wp-content/uploads/igor-vsevolodovich-girkin.pdf>

² For more details on Girkin's exploits in this conflict, see: *The Bosnian Diary. The 2nd Russian Volunteer Battalion- Bosnia (1992-1993)*, Igor Girkin, accessed 24 Apr 2017. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/559ff0cee4b002f3dc4eafda/t/56086574e4b0a63e223f8095/1443390836357/The+Bosnian+Diary+I.pdf>

³ Alexander Prokhanov has been the editor of these two very conservative newspapers. Once a marginal figure in the Russian media realm, Prokhanov has become one of the leading advocates for rebuilding Russia as a great military power. In November 2014, Prokhanov published a long interview with Girkin, where both Prokhanov and Girkin described their understanding of the conflict in SE Ukraine. "Кто ты, Стрелок?" [Who are you, Shooter?] *Zavtra*, 20 November 2014. <http://zavtra.ru/blogs/kto-tyi-strelok>

⁴ For instance, author Owen Matthews, "Meet Vladimir Putin's real challengers (they're even worse than he is)," *The Spectator* (Australia), 30 Aug 2014, claims that Girkin worked for Russian Military Intelligence (GRU). <https://spectator.com.au/2014/08/the-frightening-face-of-russias-future/> Other authors (for instance, the bloggers at the Fort Russ blog), claim that Girkin worked for the FSB. See: <http://www.fort-russ.com/2016/02/strelkov-full-military-biography-big.html>

⁵ Separating fact from fiction when it comes to Girkin's biography is a challenge. For many Russians (and even some Americans), he became the noble Russian officer fighting for the rights and safety of ethnic Russians in SE Ukraine. For additional background on his bio, see "Strelkov: Full Military Biography, Big and Detailed Interviews," *Fort Russ blog*, February 2016. <http://www.fort-russ.com/2016/02/strelkov-full-military-biography-big.html>

⁶ Svetlana Samodelova, “Ополченцы Славянска ждут штурма: ‘Устроим второй Сталинград,’” [Slavyansk militia waiting storm: “We’ll have a second Stalingrad”] *Moskovskiy Komsomolets*, 23 April 2014. <http://www.mk.ru/politics/sng/article/2014/04/23/1019328-opolchentsyi-slavyanska-zhdut-shturma-ustroim-vtoroy-stalingrad.html>

⁷ The Russian media has worked overtime to shape the pro-Kremlin narrative regarding the conflict in Ukraine. It has been a 24/7/365 operation, where every possible distortion has been spread and reinforced within the Kremlin’s media machine. The story of the crucified 3-year old boy is just the very tip of a huge, mendacious media iceberg. For details on the story, see: <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/state-run-news-station-accused-of-making-up-child-crucifixion-37289>

⁸ Angelina Shunina, Илья Варabanov, “В ‘Донецкой народной республике’ расстреляли двух командиров ополчения,” [In the ‘Donetsk People’s Republic’ two militia commanders were shot] *Kommersant*, 27 May 2014. <http://www.kommersant.ru/Doc/%202480486>

⁹ Novorossiya or “New Russia” is an ill-defined term which dates from the tsarist period and often refers to the area seized by the Russian Empire from the Ottomans in what is now SE Ukraine. Many Russians (to include President Putin) maintain that these regions were transferred to the Ukrainian SSR in the 1920s in something of an administrative transfer (not unlike the transfer of Crimea to Ukraine in 1954).

¹⁰ This aspect of the conflict in SE Ukraine illustrates both the unintended consequences which stem from any armed conflict and the level of dissatisfaction among many today in Russia. Some of the pro-Russian volunteers purportedly believed that the creation of an oligarch-free Novorossiya might be the spark for similar struggles throughout the rest of Russia. See, for instance: Kseniya Avdeeva, “В Новороссии у власти нет олигархов,” [There are no oligarchs in authority in Novorossiya] *Nakanune.ru*, 14 November 2014. <http://www.nakanune.ru/articles/19689>

¹¹ “Кто ты, Стрелок?” [Who are you, Shooter] *Zaftra*, 20 November 2014. <http://zavtra.ru/blogs/kto-tyi-strelok>

¹² The Kremlin-sponsored media has spared no expense in trying to distort what occurred to the destruction of MH-17. Given that the order to move an advanced Russian AD asset from Russia into Ukraine would have been made at the highest levels, the Kremlin leadership has a vested interest to deflect blame in the death of the 298 passengers. For background info on Girkin’s initial claim of responsibility, see: Daniel Flitton, “MH17 disaster: Is this the man who shot down the plane?” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 July 2014. <http://www.smh.com.au/world/mh17-disaster-is-this-the-man-who-shot-down-the-plane-20140718-zubvy.html>

¹³ There was the typical confusion and obfuscation regarding Girkin’s removal from Donbas. Initially it was reported that he had been injured, but then revealed that he had been simply recalled back to Moscow. For someone who had once claimed to be acting independently, Girkin appeared to have no trouble obeying Kremlin orders. For more info see: “Бывший ‘министр обороны’ ДНР исключил скорое возвращение в Донбасс,” [Former DNR ‘Minister of Defense’ Rules Out any Quick Return to the Donbas] *Interfax*, 11 September 2014. <http://www.interfax.ru/russia/396211>

¹⁴ See for instance: “Успехи российских ВВС в Сирии — ложь. Гиркин поставил под сомнение эффективность бомбежек,” [Russian AF success in Syria is a lie. Girkin questions the effectiveness of Russian bombing] *Rusmonitor*, 11 November 2015. <http://rusmonitor.com/uspekhi-rossijskikh-vvs-v-sirii-lozh-girkin-postavil-pod-sommenie-ehffektivnost-bombezhek-gir.html>

¹⁵ For instance, during the September 2016 Duma elections, a number of parties attempted to recruit Girkin into their ranks. None were successful. For additional background, see, Vera Yurchenko, “Гиркина на царство,” [Girkin as Tsar] *Novaya Gazeta*, 5 June 2015. <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2015/06/05/64412-girkina-na-tsarstvo>