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RUSSIA'S GREEN MEN: THE STRATEGIC STORY TELLERS OF HYBRID WARFARE

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Russia's Green Men: The Strategic Story Tellers of Hybrid Warfare

The “Little Green Men” who seized Ukrainian military and government facilities in February and March 2014 have become the mascots of Russia’s “new” way of war.¹ Russia’s Green Men infiltrated Crimea, linked up with local irregular forces, and seized their objectives. The obfuscation of their origins was limited – the Green Men wore no national markings, and Russian officials simply claimed that they were Crimean in origin – but the approach achieved the desired effect. Crimea acceded to the Russian Federation amidst much political outrage but little meaningful action. Russian Green Men appeared in Eastern Ukraine shortly thereafter, and, presumably, they will play an important role in a Russian intervention in the Baltic region. Consequently, the Green Men are a phenomenon worth understanding. This paper argues that the Green Men are best understood through the lens of Russian hybrid warfare in that they produced physical effects, but that these were secondary to their informational effects. Russia's Green Men in Crimea created a strategic narrative aimed at distracting international support for Ukraine. By understanding the use and context of the Green Men in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, the method can be more effectively countered in future conflicts.

The Green Men appeared in Crimea at the height of a political debacle in Kiev. Tensions had been high for some time. The polity was divided in many ways, relevant here was the split between those that saw their country’s future with Russia and those who saw it with the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Amidst the tumult, Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich fled Ukraine on 21 February and sought refuge in Russia, by which time Russia had already begun moving additional forces into Crimea across the Kerch

¹ Tomas Cizek, “Baltic States—How to react to ‘New Warfare’ in the Context of Article V?” *Slovak Journal of Political Sciences* 17:2 (2017), 186.

Strait to its base in Sebastopol. Then, on the morning of 27 February, fewer than 60 masked soldiers appeared in the Crimean capital of Simferopol and seized government buildings. They raised a Russian flag over the Crimean Parliament and forced the law-makers to accept the prime ministership of the leader of the pro-Russian party. That night, more Green Men seized airports and military facilities. The Green Men appeared without warning, and seized their objectives before handing off what they had seized to local irregular forces principally composed of pro-Russian separatists.² The Ukrainian Ground Forces and police offered little resistance to the Green Men or the militias in the chaos, and then the hamstrung political leadership in Kiev ordered them not to resist.³

Russian President Vladimir Putin initially denied that these soldiers were Russian, claiming instead that they were members of local Ukrainian self-defence forces.⁴ The press dubbed these soldiers “Little Green Men” or sometimes, due to their discipline and professionalism, “Polite People.”⁵ The soldiers wore green uniforms and carried Russian personal equipment and weapons, but did not bear Russian flags or other identifying insignia. Despite the absence of this insignia or an expression of responsibility by Russia, early media

² Vladimir Rauta notes that the irregular forces were not homogenous; their motivations being political, monetary, or criminal. This paper is agnostic to their motivations. For purposes of this analysis, what matters is that they were sufficiently malleable to Russian interests. Vladimir Rauta, “Proxy agents, auxiliary forces, and sovereign defection: assessing the outcomes of using non-state actors in civil conflicts,” *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 16:1 (2016): 92. See also ‘*Little Green Men*’: *A Primer on Modern Russian Unconventional Warfare, Ukraine 2013-2014* (Fort Bragg, NC: United States Army Special Operations Command, 2018), 43.

³ Oksona Syroyid, *Evidences of Russian Military Aggression Against Ukraine* (Lviv: NGO Prosvita Institute: 2019), 12-22; *Little Green Men*: *A Primer on Modern Russian Unconventional Warfare, Ukraine 2013-2014* (Fort Bragg, NC: United States Army Special Operations Command, 2018), 31.

⁴ See, for example, Sergei L. Loiko, “Some ‘local’ forces in Crimea look a lot like Russian military,” *Los Angeles Times*, 4 March 2014; Bill Chappell and Mark Memmott, “Putting Says Those Aren’t Russian Forces in Crimea,” *NPR News*, 4 March 2014, accessed at <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2014/03/04/285653335/putin-says-those-arent-russian-forces-in-crimea>.

⁵ John R. Haines, “How, Why and When Russia Will Deploy its Little Green Men, and Why the U.S. Cannot,” *Foreign Policy Research Institute E-Note*, 9 March 2016, accessed at <https://www.fpri.org/article/2016/03/how-why-and-when-russia-will-deploy-little-green-men-and-why-the-us-cannot/>

reports show that there was little doubt that the invaders were Russian. Indeed, why would the Green Men need a different term at all to distinguish them from the militias if they were believed to be one and the same? There was ambiguity in the situation, certainly, but by mid-March, an Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) inspection team reported substantial evidence that the Green Men were Russian soldiers based on their use of Russian personal equipment, small arms, crew-served weapons, and BTR-80 armoured personnel carriers.⁶

On 2 March, claiming to be acting in support of the Crimean Parliament and to secure Russian interests at their naval base at the port of Sebastopol (home of the Russian Black Sea Fleet since 1783), Russian military units entered the peninsula, marking the transition from plausibly deniable actions to overt military intervention.⁷ Russian information operations, already successful in narrative building, now included significant counter-command activities: cyberattacks shut down Ukrainian communications infrastructure and government websites, and the cellular phones of Ukrainian officials were jammed.⁸ At that point, Russia had SOF operating throughout the Crimean Peninsula with significant influence over pro-Russian militia groups, an armoured force ashore, naval supremacy in the Black Sea, and the means to project considerable air power from bases in the Northern Caucasus region. Russia had called the international community's bluff, and military intervention to save Crimea seemed impossible. On 18 March, Russia and the ostensible representatives of Crimea signed a treaty incorporating Crimea into the Russian Federation. Although this accession is not recognized by the

⁶ Peter Felstead and Georg Mader, "OSCE evidence lifts lid on 'little green men' in Crimea," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 13 March 2014.

⁷ Kristen Ven Bruusgaard, "Crimea and Russia's Strategic Overhaul," *Parameters* 44:3 (Autumn 2014): 83-84.

⁸ Emilio J. Iasiello, "Russia's Improved Information Operations: From Georgia to Crimea," *Parameters* 47:2 (2017): 54-55.

international community at large, the fact remains that Russia presently holds *de facto* control over the peninsula.⁹

Little is known – from publicly available sources, that is – about Russian internal decision making. We are left to draw conclusions based on observed actions, reasonably foreseeable outcomes, presumed objectives, and what published records exist.¹⁰ Within these constraints, this paper argues that Russia’s Green Men were employed as they were in order to create a strategic narrative meant to distract the international community from aiding Ukraine. It arrives on this conclusion for three key reasons. First, the use of Green Men accords with what we know about Russian thinking regarding hybrid warfare. Second, the presence or absence of national markings made almost no difference from a tactical or legal point of view regarding Ukraine’s ability to resist the incursion. Third, the use of Green Men complemented the broader Russian information operation.

Although most characteristics of hybrid warfare are hardly new, a reasonable starting point for examining modern Russian hybrid warfare is the 2013 article written by then Russian Chief of the General Staff, General Valeryi Gerasimov. Writing in the wake of the 2011 Arab Spring, Gerasimov noted that conflicts with a clear delineation between states of war and peace were a thing of the past. Most conflicts occurred somewhere in between, and the outcome of these conflicts were more likely to be shaped by non-military means than by firepower.

Disinformation and subterfuge precede combat operations. SOF working with “internal

⁹ The United Nations General Assembly issued a non-binding resolution on the Territorial Integrity of Ukraine on 27 March 2014 disputing the Crimean referendum and affirming Ukraine’s political boundaries as including Ukraine. Canada was one of the six countries that introduced the resolution. See United Nations General Assembly, Resolution 68/272, 27 March 2014.

¹⁰ Iona-Nelia Bercean, “Ukraine: Russia’s New Art of War,” *Online Journal Modelling the New Europe* 21 (2016): 158.

opposition” in concert with information operations create a “permanently operating front through the entire territory of the enemy state.” Gerasimov noted, “The open use of forces – often under the guise of peacekeeping and crisis regulation – is resorted to only at a certain stage, primarily for the achievement of final success in the conflict.”¹¹

Gerasimov’s article was not doctrine, nor was it a description of how he intended to conduct offensive operations – it was actually a description of how he thought NATO might attack Russia.¹² Consequently, it would be an error to ascribe too much to Gerasimov’s words. He was not setting out his plan for invading Crimea, Eastern Ukraine, and the Baltic states, but rather reflecting upon the realities of modern warfare. Nonetheless, in Gerasimov’s article, we can see the basis of Russia’s Green Men. Gerasimov states that non-military activities – such as information operations – are often more potent than firepower, and although he makes no express mention of obscuring the national origins of the SOF elements working with internal opposition, he juxtaposes them against the later “open use of force.” This suggests that the SOF he imagines operating throughout the enemy state should ideally be plausibly deniable by their country of origin.

Commentators have attempted to meaningfully define hybrid warfare, but with mixed results. Former United States Marine Corps Officer Frank G. Hoffman, writing in 2007, is

¹¹ Gerasimov’s article, “The Value of Science is in the Foresight,” was published in *Military-Industrial Kurier*, 27 February 2013, and was subject to open discussion in English-speaking media after Mark Galeotti, an expert on Russia at the Royal United Services Institute, posted a translation with commentary on his blog in 2014. Mark Galeotti, “The ‘Gerasimov Doctrine’ and Russian Non-Linear War,” *In Moscow’s Shadows: Analysis and Assessment of Russian Crime and Security*, June 2014, accessed at <https://inmoscowsshadows.wordpress.com/2014/07/06/the-gerasimov-doctrine-and-russian-non-linear-war/>; Mark Galeotti, “The Mythical ‘Gerasimov Doctrine’ and the Language of Threat,” *Critical Studies on Security* 7:2 (2019): 157.

¹² Mark Galeotti, “The Mythical ‘Gerasimov Doctrine’ and the Language of Threat,” *Critical Studies on Security* 7:2 (2019): 157-158; Mark Galeotti, “I’m Sorry for Creating the ‘Gerasimov Doctrine,’” *Foreign Policy*, 5 March 2018, accessed online at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/03/05/im-sorry-for-creating-the-gerasimov-doctrine/>.

credited with coining the term in English, describing it as incorporating, “a full range of different modes of warfare, including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder.”¹³ Notably, while regular and irregular forces have long complimented each other, Hoffman describes hybrid warfare as blending the two forces in the same space, at the same time, and within the same organization.¹⁴ The scholarship on the subject exploded after the Russian intervention in Crimea as scholars grappled with making sense of the events, to the point that there is no shortage of definitions of hybrid warfare attempting to bring clarity to what happened in Crimea. Some have pointed out that these reverse-engineered definitions are simply too broad. By encapsulating almost everything besides large-scale conventional operations, the term hybrid warfare has been stretched to the point that it does not describe a strategy but rather a pragmatic operational approach that will largely be shaped by local conditions.¹⁵ This analysis proceeds on the idea that the defined term is not as important as the general concept: a pragmatic approach to war that makes significant use of difficult to attribute military and non-military activities in the grey zone between war and peace. The Green Men, as used in Crimea, are certainly an example of this.

The Green Men fall within the parameters of the Russian approach to hybrid warfare, but that alone does not explain why Russia employed Green Men in Crimea. We must also ask what, if anything, was achieved by the absence of national markings from either a tactical or legal point of view. The answer is: very little, if anything. In international humanitarian law,

¹³ Frank G. Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars* (Arlington, Virginia: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, 2007), 8.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁵ Bettina Renz and Hanna Smith, “Russia and Hybrid Warfare- Going Beyond the Label,” *Aleksanteri Papers* (Aleksanteri Institute, University of Helsinki, 2016), 3, 5, 7; Eve Hunter and Piret Pernik, *The Challenges of Hybrid Warfare* (Tallinn, Estonia: International Centre for Defence and Security, April 2015), 5

there is no requirement to display national insignia on military uniforms or equipment. Although the use of coloured or subdued patches indicating country of origin has become a common practice, the practice is lawfully the result of the home country's internal regulations of its forces and not their international legal obligations. Military forces are prohibited from engaging in perfidy – the act of disguising themselves as civilians – but failing to display Russian flags is quite a different matter. The Green Men could be described as failing to outwardly demonstrate their status as Russian soldiers, or in misrepresenting themselves as irregular forces. The former is entirely lawful. The latter is still lawful, but potentially denies these soldiers access to the full rights of prisoners of war should they be captured. Regardless, the use of Green Men is a presumptively legal ruse of war.¹⁶

As a tactical consideration, the presence or absence of national insignia was of no importance. Had they construed the Green Men exclusively as a domestic threat, the Ukrainian Ground Forces would have been constrained by their domestic legal regime concerning the use of force against their own people. This may have shifted the resistance from being a military-led operation to a police-led operation with military support, but the use of force would certainly be warranted. More likely, however, recognizing that the conflict was driven by foreign interference, the rules of international humanitarian law would have governed the conflict and the Ukrainian Ground Forces would have only been required to distinguish combatants from non-combatants. In the majority of cases, the Green Men were obviously combatants committing hostile acts. The Ukrainian soldiers could have fired upon the Green Men whether

¹⁶ Ines Gillich, "Illegally Evading Attribution: Russia's Use of Unmarked Troops in Crimea and International Humanitarian Law," *Vanderbilt Journal of Transnational Law* 48:5 (November 2015): 1211-1214.

they believed they were Russian state forces, irregulars, or otherwise. There was no obligation for the Ukrainian Ground Forces to determine the identity of the combatants.

If the use of Green Men – that is, the simple act of removing patches and pretending that the soldiers were Crimean in origin – did not afford a particular tactical or legal advantage, then what was the point? Why establish this fiction, and who was the intended audience? The audience was not the soldiers who might have immediately opposed the Green Men – the Ukrainian Ground Forces and the local police to whom the narrative made little difference – but rather the international community. The approach did not have to be entirely convincing. It had to sow confusion, disunity, and time. It had to obfuscate the Russian involvement only as much and for as long as was necessary to establish “facts on the ground” such that reversing what had been gained by the Russians would have cost more blood and treasure than anyone was willing to spend. Arguably, it also provided the international community with a sufficient excuse to not commit to such a costly intervention.

It is important to note that the Russian claims regarding the Green Men both addressed what the Green Men *were* (positive statements), and also what they *were not* (negative statements). According to Russian authorities, the Green Men *were not* Russian soldiers. This was an entirely predictable claim. The Russian Federation sought to maintain plausible deniability of the military operation and disavowed their actions within a sovereign state.¹⁷ But they also made the positive claim that the Green Men *were* Ukrainian self-defence forces.¹⁸ This claim – implausibly, given all the other known factors – shifted the characterization of the

¹⁷ Michael Poznansky, “Revisiting plausible deniability,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* (2020): 7-9.

¹⁸ Tomas Cizek, “Baltic States—How to react to ‘New Warfare’ in the Context of Article V?” *Slovak Journal of Political Sciences* 17:2 (2017): 190.

conflict from an international conflict to a domestic one. If it was a domestic conflict, then the sovereign state of Ukraine could certainly invite foreign intervenors onto its territory to provide assistance, but there was less of an impetus to rally the international community. If it was an international conflict – that is, Russian interference in the domestic affairs of Ukraine – then it was, at a minimum, a violation of the United Nations (UN) Charter’s prohibition on the use of force against the territorial integrity of a state, and a call to action for the UN’s membership.¹⁹

Russian officials justified their annexation of Crimea using three key messages. First, they argued that the transfer of Crimea from the Soviet Union to Ukraine in 1954 was illegitimate – the annexation was therefore righting a historical wrong. Second, they dismissed American and EU condemnation of their actions as nothing more than their instinctive, vestigial Cold War resentment. Third, they argued that the ascension of Crimea to Russia was an act of self-determination.²⁰ The Green Men were directly relevant to the latter point. The Green Men communicated that the uprising in Crimea was an act of self-determination – the Crimean people were rising up against the Ukrainian state – and the annexation was merely the continuation of the desire.

Although Russia’s use of Green Men was very successful in Crimea, it should not be viewed as a panacea. Specific conditions were required for the Green Men to be effective. Anton Shekhovtsov, a Ukrainian expert on Russia’s manipulation of right-wing proxies, points to three conditions necessary for the Green Men operations. First, the targeted region must largely be Russian in terms of culture and language – this affords the Green Men with ethno-cultural camouflage. Second, the forces must be able to reach their objectives covertly which limits the

¹⁹ *Charter of the United Nations and Statute of the International Court of Justice*, 26 June 1945, article 2(4).

²⁰ Thomas Ambrosio, “The rhetoric of irredentism: The Russian Federation’s perception management campaign and the annexation of Crimea,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27:3 (2016): 468.

geographical range of the Green Men from Russian territory. Third, border control must be weak enough in the target country for the Green Men's reliable insertion.²¹ To these three, I would add one more: the will to fight. When Russia's Green Men arrived in Crimea, the Ukrainian state was politically divided and perhaps unsure if they could win in Crimea given Russia's substantial forces on or near the Crimean Peninsula. Consequently, the Green Men were able to seize and hold their objectives while establishing the narrative of the conflict being an internal matter. While the international community dithered in the face of this narrative, Russia continued the ruse and Crimea acceded to the Russian Federation.

The circumstances in Eastern Ukraine were similar to Crimea, but dissimilar enough to make all the difference. The three conditions described by Shekhovtsov were not met. There is a Russian-speaking minority in Eastern Ukraine, but it is much less predominant than in Crimea. Although Eastern Ukraine is contiguous with Russia, the border was more secure and Russia did not already have sizeable forces in Eastern Ukraine (such as their naval base in Sebastopol). And the Ukrainian state had mobilized the will to fight. When Green Men appeared in Eastern Ukraine in late March, the Ukrainian Ground Forces put up a stiff resistance. They fought the Green Men and the irregular forces, and then they fought the conventional forces – claimed by Russia to be “volunteers” and not acting under state direction – when they crossed the frontier more overtly. On the physical plain, the Green Men were not able to seize and hold their objectives. On the informational plain, their actions were not sufficiently credible as acts of self-determination.

²¹ Anton Shekhovtsov, “Who is afraid of the ‘little green men’?” *The Intersection Project: Russia/Europe/World*, 21 September 2015, accessed at <https://intersectionproject.eu/article/security/who-afraid-little-green-men>.

The outcome of Ukraine's resistance to Russia in this war in Eastern Ukraine is hardly cause for celebration; one UN report cites Ukrainian casualties in the Donbass region at more than 13,000 and the OSCE's observer mission continues to report new Russian assets in "separatist-controlled territory" in Eastern Ukraine as recently as March 2020.²² However, Ukraine has been able to resist the incursion and has received aid from the international community, including material aid and a military training mission from Canada. The Green Men did not prevail. They failed to achieve the same results as they had in Crimea, and the conflict has devolved to an outwardly less sophisticated form of warfare. Russia has maintained its fiction, but Ukrainian resistance has robbed the fiction of much influence.

The next conflict in which Russian Green Men may play a role is the Baltic region.²³ The three Baltic states are contiguous with Russia, and Estonia and Latvia are home to large Russian-speaking minority communities. The residents of the border city of Narva in Estonia are mostly Russian-speaking, and the Latvian capital of Riga has a population of approximately 50% Russian-speakers – they seem likely candidates for the sudden appearance of Green Men.²⁴ While this threat should not be ignored, there are a few reasons why this is unlikely. First, the border between Russia and the Baltic states is hardly porous. It is a well-guarded border and this reduces, but does not eliminate, the ability of Green Men to tactically infiltrate the Baltic states.

²² Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Report on the Human Rights Situation in Ukraine 16 November 2019 to 15 February 2020," (New York: United Nations, 12 March 2020), 8; OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine, "Daily Report 60/2020," 12 March 2020, accessed at <https://www.osce.org/special-monitoring-mission-to-ukraine/448393?download=true>.

²³ Elias Götz, "Russia, the West, and the Ukraine crisis: three contending perspectives," *Contemporary Politics* 22:3 (2016): 252-253; Steven Pifer, "Watch out for Little Green Men," *Brookings Institute Blog*, 7 July 2014, available at <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/watch-out-for-little-green-men/>.

²⁴ Tomas Cizek, "Baltic States—How to react to 'New Warfare' in the Context of Article V?" *Slovak Journal of Political Sciences* 17:2 (2017): 190-191; Rod Thornton and Manos Karagiannis, "The Russian Threat to the Baltic States: The Problems of Shaping Local Defence Mechanisms," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 29:3 (2016): 342.

Second, the Baltic states continue to communicate their will to fight any would-be invaders. For example, the Estonian head general, Riho Terras, made statements along the lines of, “the first little green man to set foot on Estonian soil will be shot.”²⁵ Third, the Baltic states (unlike Ukraine) are members of NATO and afforded protection under the collective defence provisions of NATO’s Charter, and NATO’s Enhanced Forward Presence units (including the Canadian battle group in Latvia) reduce the risk of ambiguity delaying initial mobilization.²⁶ That said, Article V of the NATO Charter requires clear evidence of an armed attack. Russian use of Green Men might sufficiently obscure the Russian origin of the attack to give more reluctant members of NATO an excuse to not come to the Baltic states’ aid, or to minimize their contribution.²⁷

Although these considerations weigh against the effective employment of Green Men in the Baltic region, the threat should not be ignored. These impediments are mostly physical and could be overcome with novel methods and the assumption of much risk. As we have seen, the principle function of the Green Men is in the construction of a strategic narrative, and Russia has been targeting Russian-speaking residents of the Baltic states for some time in an effort to convince them that they would be better off under Russian rule.²⁸ To counter the Green Men on the informational plain, NATO must degrade Russia’s ability to establish this narrative. Some of this can be done reactively – in response to an incursion – but most steps must take place well in advance. In the Baltic context, this means addressing any legitimate grievances held by potential

²⁵ “Estonia Ready to Deal with Russia’s ‘Little Green Men,’” *Financial Times*, 13 May 2015.

²⁶ NATO, *North Atlantic Treaty*, 4 April 1949, Article V; NATO, “Enhanced Forward Presence: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland,” accessed at <https://shape.nato.int/efp>.

²⁷ Tomas Cizek, “Baltic States—How to react to ‘New Warfare’ in the Context of Article V?” *Slovak Journal of Political Sciences* 17:2 (2017): 191-192; Rod Thornton and Manos Karagiannis, “The Russian Threat to the Baltic States: The Problems of Shaping Local Defence Mechanisms,” *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 29:3 (2016): 339-340.

²⁸ Rod Thornton and Manos Karagiannis, “The Russian Threat to the Baltic States: The Problems of Shaping Local Defence Mechanisms,” *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 29:3 (2016): 339, 335-336.

allies to the Green Men; promoting the rule of law such that irregular forces cannot function and are widely understood to be untenable; and establishing robust systems of public communication that are generally trusted and can be used in a crisis. If Russia's Green Men are robbed of their narrative building function, to domestic and foreign audiences alike, their utility will be degraded such that deterrence of this particular threat might be achieved without a shot fired.

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