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VILE BODIES

HOW FASCISTS, CULTISTS AND SPOOKS
SPEARHEADED RUSSIA'S WAR ON UKRAINE

FREE RUSSIA FOUNDATION
2023

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Executive Summary

- The Russian project to cleave away Ukraine's eastern Donbas region began immediately after the 2004 Orange Revolution, with members of Aleksandr Dugin's far-right Eurasian Youth Union kicked into action from 2005 onwards as the "Donetsk Republic" movement, organizing protests and ultimately paramilitary training camps.
- Aleksandr Borodai, Igor Girkin and Olga Kulygina - Russian operatives who would ultimately lead the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and even head the self-declared Donetsk People's Republic - all had a common history in the Transnistrian war as the USSR collapsed. That war itself set a precedent for the mechanisms used in Ukraine between 2014 and 2015 is established in Transnistria in the early '90s, with "former" KGB officials there confirming the role of the Kremlin. Assets of the Russian special services who were sent there head security after attempting to violently suppress revolution in Latvia. The Russian military proved decisive on the side of separatists.
- By 1993, all the key players in the creation of the "People's Republic of Donetsk" were aligned with the opposition to Boris Yeltsin during the constitutional crisis. Borodai, Kulygina and Dugin were all present in Moscow during the standoff and ensuing violent crackdown by government forces.
- Borodai, Kulygina and Girkin remained close through the '90s, writing for *Zavtra* (Tomorrow), a publication run by Aleksandr Prokhanov, a hardcore Russian nationalist and militarist, even as Girkin went to work for the FSB.
- Borodai, Kulygina and Girkin were thrown into action in the stealth takeover of Crimea in February 2014.
- This troika of operatives migrated to Donbas — Sloviansk and Donetsk, in particular — coordinating their insurgent activities from the very outset, with Borodai's role hidden until mid-May. Borodai became "prime minister" of the DNR and appointed Girkin his "defense minister," responsible for a series of gruesome atrocities in and around Sloviansk.
- Girkin's work for the FSB was by now well-established. Borodai's ties to the service, however, continued to be interrogated, with SBU (Ukrainian security) intercepts showing Borodai himself hinting at a close relationship to Kontora (a Russian slang term for the FSB).
- Kulygina turned up in Sloviansk posing as an "academic expert on management theory," but expertly wielding an assault rifle. She was captured by HUR, Ukrainian military intelligence, whose director believed her to be a high-ranking officer in the GRU, Russia's military intelligence agency.
- Kulygina did not fold under questioning, but the Russians exerted enormous effort to secure her release, including conducting mock executions of Ukrainian POWs and threatening terror attacks on Kyiv. Kulygina was traded for at least 17 Ukrainian captives.

- Borodai and Girkin's tenure in Donetsk was as short-lived as it is ignominious. Girkin is later convicted in absentia by a Dutch court for the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 using a Russian-imported BUK anti-aircraft missile, killing all 298 people on board.
- Borodai himself was replaced by the former Transnistrian KGB chief Vladimir Antyufeyev. The nationalists like Girkin and Borodai weren't the only extremists to be utilized by the Russian security services in Ukraine. Just before the siege of Sloviansk had begun, members of a KGB-spawned cult called Concept of Public Security or "Konceptsiya Obshchestvennoy Bezopasnosti" (KOB) had taken over broadcasts at the city's TV center. The group broadcast lectures recorded in the 90s by the late Russian Maj. Gen. Konstantin Petrov, laying out antisemitic conspiracy theories and mind-numbing management jargon.
- KOB originated in Russia and was first promulgated at the direction of Filipp Bobkov, head of the KGB's 5th Directorate. The movement combined veneration of Stalin and the USSR with neo-paganism.
- The cult wormed its way into parliament, academia and the FSB over the course of the 90s and early 2000s, but by the middle of that decade, it appeared to have run its course, with an affiliated political party, KPE, deregistered after failing to win any seats in 2007 and Maj. Gen. Petrov dying in 2009.
- But KOB played a quiet but key role in the network operating in Ukraine. A network of assets was sprung into action in 2013 and 2022, with members appearing at protests and rallies, organizing militias and "communes," often in concert with other esoteric fringe movements, and eventually coming to prominence in the form of long-time adherent and activist Kiril Stremousov, who served as "deputy governor" and the face of the Russian occupation administration in Kherson until his death in a purported car crash in November, 2022.
- Away from the realm of political technology, Neo-Nazis were increasingly involved in Russian battlefield operations during the first invasion, setting up paramilitary groups to fight there and operating with the Wagner Group.
- Rusich, known for committing war crimes in Ukraine, is a Sabotage-Assault and Reconnaissance Group led by a former Russian paratrooper and self-declared Nazi named Aleksei Milchakov. When it first appeared in Donbas as a paramilitary organization, it operated as part of Rapid Reaction Group (GBR) "Batman," headed by the Russian commander Aleksandr Bednov.
- Bednov was killed in 2015 in Luhansk. Surviving members of GBR Batman alleged that his assassination was carried out by Wagner — the first ever public mention of Yevgeny Prigozhin's mercenary corps.
- Wagner joined the Russian army against Ukraine in the assault on Debaltseve. Despite Wagner's alleged role in their former commander's murder, Milchakov and other Rusich fighters would later reappear abroad, fighting alongside the group in Syria.
- Rusich returned to Ukraine in 2022, having linked up with Borodai in the meantime via the Union of Donbass Volunteers organization he runs with Kulygina. The organization is funded

by ultra-Orthodox oligarch (and friend to the Western religious right) Konstantin Malofeyev, and overseen by Vladislav Surkov.

- Rusich fighters were photographed with Borodai at a Union of Donbass Volunteers training camp in Russia's Belgorod region as late as April 2022.
- Rusich's most visible deployment has been on the front line near the Donetsk suburb of Maryinka. It has an outsized presence on social media, often championing the most violent and extreme methods of prosecuting the failing war.
- Another fascist paramilitary group that followed a similar path from the battlefields of Donbas to adventuring with Wagner abroad was Russkoye Imperskoye Dvizheniye (RID), the Russian Imperial Movement, known for its extensive network of connections with Western neo-Nazis.
- RID's paramilitary wing, the Imperial Legion, is helmed by Denis Gariev, who also runs its Partizan Center training facility in St. Petersburg, training new legionnaires. It attracts neo-Nazis internationally.
- RID's leaders had traveled to Kyiv and then Crimea in the early days of the Euromaidan demonstrations that unseats Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich. Its goal was to set up paramilitary groups that would be trained and dispatched to the occupied regions.
- RID later joins Wagner in their operations in Libya.
- The Imperial Legion returned to Ukraine in May 2022, engaging in heavy fighting in the Kharkiv region before being forced to withdraw and regroup near Bakhmut. Much of the RID propaganda around the war has been religious and apocalyptic in nature.
- The group has also been accused by Western intelligence officials of using their close contacts with fascists in Spain to facilitate a series of letter bombings on behalf of the GRU, targeting Spanish government and NATO allies' diplomatic offices in the country.

Introduction

When President Vladimir Putin addressed the Russian public to announce that the full-scale invasion of Ukraine had begun in February 2022, he claimed that a key aim of the “special military operation” was “de-Nazification,” the removal of the supposedly neo-Nazi leadership in Kyiv.

It ought to go without saying that this was not true and that the Jewish, Russian-speaking, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is not leading a fascist effort to subjugate ethnic Russians, necessitating a “humanitarian” campaign to obliterate cities across the country, regardless of the real presence of neo-Nazis within certain units of the Ukrainian armed forces and other allied paramilitary outfits.

In what might be described as a case of Freudian projection, the Russian government of today hews closely to the traditional definition of fascistic, certainly in contrast to the country it has tried to conquer. No shortage of Russian state media coverage has been dedicated to the complete militarization of society, the veneration of empty symbols, genocidal rhetoric about Ukrainians, paranoia about the American and NATO enemy at the gates and corrosive fifth columnists within. Then there is Putin’s open embrace of a “holy war” against the degenerate liberalism of the West as embodied, as he sees it, by LGBTQ rights, “cancel culture” and the erosion of traditional values.

But none of this should be surprising. Despite years of documentation, the Russian government has somehow persuaded a surprising number of foreigners that the first eight years of the current war, waged by the puppet “People’s Republics” of Donetsk and Luhansk, was in some way a left-wing or even “antifascist struggle.”

The actors whom the Russian security services relied upon to realize this project, which began in 2004, developing quietly before shifting gear into outright warfare in 2014, had long strived to rebuild the fallen Russian Empire. All of them had come of age in the 1990s when the shock of the Soviet Union’s catastrophic implosion left many of those on the right, who had been among its fiercest critics, enraged by its territorial disintegration. What is more, these individuals had relationships with each other, often close, that went back well before the war, to the 1990s.

This report is a history of how Russia’s war against Ukraine was, from its very inception, led by figures from the extreme far right of Russia, politicians, intelligence operatives, mercenaries and military commanders whose career-defining personal relationships and eccentric religious and ideological beliefs were developed in the chaotic final days of the USSR.

It is also a story of how the Russian security services cultivated these individuals and ideas, despite their apparent hostility to the incumbent regime, not just to use as assets for provocations or plausible deniability, but also as a long-term strategy for survival and dominance.

Since the days of the Tsar’s own secret police, the Okhrana, the Russian security services have infiltrated and used the fringes of the political opposition to stage provocations and control dissent. What is different about the figures in this report is that these political extremists, with their eccentric personalities and ideologies that were anathema to the official line, would not just be employed as tools but also given critical, public-facing tasks of state in wartime. Rather than operating in the murk,

these individuals, bringing along much of their ideological baggage, became household names at home and international pariahs.

The ascendancy of the far-right in the Russian state had a long gestation. Back in the 1980s, as it became apparent that communism had reached an ideological and economic dead end, the security services appear to have decided to use fascism as a lifeboat to ensure the survival of their authoritarian “deep state.”

This process was taking place not only on the battlefields of newly independent republics but also within the halls of power. While the KGB’s rivals in the CIA are much better known for investing time and money in search of paranormal phenomena such as remote viewing¹ and telekinesis,² such ideas were also circulating among Russian spooks in the social and political turmoil of the ‘90s.³ Nikolai Patrushev, the former head of the FSB (the successor to the KGB) and current chair of Russia’s powerful security council, has cited “statements” made by the former and late U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright purportedly demonstrating American desires to conquer and carve up Siberia. These statements were credited to Georgy Rogozin, a psychic general in the KGB and Presidential Security Service.⁴

Against this background, the KGB concocted their own esoteric cult, drawing on a logic-destroying combination of dry, management theory jargon, pseudo-paganism and old-fashioned antisemitism.

1 Sergey Ptichkin , “General FSO: In the Thoughts of Madeleine Albright, We Found a Pathological Hatred of the Slavs),” *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, December 22, 2006 (in Russian). URL: <https://www.rg.ru/2006/12/22/gosbezopasnostj-podsoznanie.html>

2 Larry Greenemeier, “U.S. and Soviet Spooks Studied Paranormal Powers to Find a Cold War Advantage,” *Scientific American* , October 29, 2008. URL: <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/news-blog/us-and-soviet-spooks-studied-parano-2008-10-29/>

3 Svetlana Kuzina, “Do Psychotronic Weapons Still Exist?,” *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, August 8, 2007 (in Russian). URL: <https://www.kp.ru/daily/23948.4/71317/>

4 Oleg Kashin, “How the Hallucinations of an Eccentric KGB Psychic Influence Russia Today,” *The Guardian*, July 15, 2015. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/15/russia-kgb-psychic-oleg-kashin>

Chapter 1. The Donetsk Republic

Even before Russia used FSB operatives and paramilitaries armed with heavy weapons in its initial 2014 invasion of Donbas in eastern Ukraine, a so-called Donetsk Republic had already existed as a minor political movement and ambition for several years. It was founded in 2005 in the aftermath of the Orange Revolution, when massive protests against vote rigging in the presidential election by then-Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich led to a repeat election and the victory of pro-European liberal Viktor Yushchenko.

The Donetsk Republic set about agitating for an independent Donetsk region through protests and petitions.⁵ The group also disrupted events such as a planned visit by then U.S. Ambassador John Tefft to an IT seminar⁶ and a memorial service for victims of the Holodomor,⁷ the famine wrought upon Ukraine in the early 1930s. It was this organization that would eventually, in 2014, become the official governing party of the self-declared Donetsk People's Republic, with one of its co-founders, Andrei Purgin, serving as "deputy prime minister" and speaker of the "supreme soviet" for about a year.⁸

Both Purgin and another co-founder, Oleg Frolov,⁹ who would become a paramilitary commander during the war, were members of the Eurasian Youth Union (ESM),¹⁰ a far-right organization that was founded by Russia's most notorious fascist philosopher Aleksandr Dugin in 2005 and perceived in Ukraine as a countermeasure against the Orange Revolution.¹¹

5 Vsevolod Vladimirov, "'Donetsk Republic' Presented Ukraine as One, but Divisible," *Ura Inform*, January 10, 2007 (in Russian). URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20140330064446/http://ura.dn.ua/10.01.2007/23113.html>; "Independence Declared in Donetsk," *DNI*, February 10, 2009 (in Russian). URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20140330052134/http://www.dni.ru/society/2009/2/10/159114.html>

6 "Police and Russian Fascism in Donetsk. Who Serves whom?," March 4, 2013 (in Russian). URL: <https://www.ostro.org/ru/articles/mylytsyya-y-ruskyj-fashyzm-v-donetske-kto-komu-sluzhyt-i142342>

7 "Collection of Signatures for the Independence of the Donetsk Republic," *Rossiya-3*, November 30, 2006, (in Russian). URL: https://web.archive.org/web/20071024175131/http://rossia3.ru/Regions/don_agt

8 "Andrei Purgin: 'My Resignation Was Absolute Lawlessness,'" *BBC Russia Service*, September 9, 2015 (in Russian). URL: https://www.bbc.com/russian/international/2015/09/150909_purgin_dnr_interview

9 "Oleg Frolov (Call Sign Shaman), a Company Commander of the People's Militia of the DPR, Told How a Shell of the Armed Forces of Ukraine Exploded in Front of His Face When He Evacuated a Wounded Comrade," *DNR News*, October 14, 2022 (in Russian). URL: <https://dnr-news.ru/society/2022/10/14/136038.html>

10 "ESM Summer Camp - August 2006," *Rossiya-3*, date unknown (archived on October 28, 2007), (in Russian). URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20061028042648/http://rossia3.ru/foto2>

11 Andrei Okara, "New Ukrainian Oprichnina, or What Is Common between 'Pora', Neo-Eurasianists, Ivan the Terrible and Yulia Tymoshenko?," *Zerkalo Nedeli (ZN)*, March 12-18, 2005 (in Russian). URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20070927194411/http://www.zn.ua/1000/1550/49482/>



Purgin (center) at a Donetsk Republic protest in Mariupol in November 2007, holding the banner of the ESM.¹²

In 2006, Purgin and several other Donetsk Republic activists traveled to an ESM camp in Russia to attend a series of lectures and seminars led by Dugin¹³ and participated in hand-to-hand combat training.¹⁴

By 2009, the Donetsk Republic had held their own small combat training camp in Ukraine, with photos showing members practicing the use of firearms and Molotov cocktails.¹⁵ Curiously, the group

12 "Collection of Signatures for the Independence of the Donetsk Republic," Rossiya-3, November 30, 2006, (in Russian). URL: https://web.archive.org/web/20071024175131/http://rossia3.ru/Regions/don_agt

13 Anton Shekhovtsov, "How Alexander Dugin's Neo-Eurasianists Geared Up for the Russian-Ukrainian War in 2005-2013," *The Interpreter*, January 26, 2016. URL: <https://www.interpretermag.com/how-alexander-dugins-neo-eurasianists-geared-up-for-the-russian-ukrainian-war-in-2005-2013/>; "ESM Summer Camp - August 2006," Rossiya-3, date unknown (archived on August 19, 2007), (in Russian). URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20070819230107/http://rossia3.ru/foto4>

14 "ESM Summer Camp - August 2006," Rossiya-3, date unknown (archived on August 19, 2007), (in Russian). URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20070819225919/http://rossia3.ru/foto1>

15 Donetskaya Respublika, Photoalbum, Vkonktate. URL: https://web.archive.org/web/20140728221753/http://vk.com/album-3223620_95208996

later became unnerved and edited the online photo album of the event,¹⁶ deleting photos that clearly showed what small-arms analyst Calibre Obscura has told the authors is a live SKS rifle, and adding a disclaimer that “all the weapons are fakes.”¹⁷



*Photos from the Donetsk Republic combat training camp in 2009.*¹⁸

16 Donetskaya Respublika, “Leadership meetings. All weapons are fake”, VKontakte. URL: https://vk.com/album-3223620_95208996

17 Calibre Obscura, Twitter Profile. URL: <https://twitter.com/CalibreObscura>

18 Donetskaya Respublika, Photo Album, Vkonktate. URL: https://web.archive.org/web/20140728221753/http://vk.com/album-3223620_95208996

In 2012 the Donetsk Republic opened its first “embassy” at the Moscow headquarters of the ESM.¹⁹ This was two years before paramilitaries seized any physical territory in Donbas, but the political precursor for the “People’s Republic” was established.

Dugin is not central to this story, and his ideological influence within the Russian right is often greatly exaggerated. He has never been “Putin’s brain,” whatever the sensationalist Western press claims. In fact, his most significant domestic achievement in recent years was avoiding an apparent assassination attempt, orchestrated by Ukrainian military intelligence — an attempt that instead killed his relatively obscure daughter, Darya Dugina, in a car bombing in central Moscow in August 2022.

However, Dugin’s sprawling international network is testimony to his real utility not as just as an ideological influencer but as an agent of the state; and that network inevitably overlaps and intersects with many of the people and organizations in question. Dugin also shares the same pedigree of having been born into a family of spies.

Dugin’s father, Geli, was a general in Soviet military intelligence (GRU), although the two had a distant relationship.²⁰ Geli left the family when Aleksandr was 3 years old. Dugin claims that his father was demoted to the Customs Service as a result of his provocative anti-communist activities, which included recording songs that toyed with Nazism under the pseudonym “Hans Sievers.”

In the late ‘80s, Dugin joined *Pamyat* (Memory), the first political organization to publicly promote far-right views in the Soviet Union. *Pamyat*, which was tolerated by the Soviet authorities despite the fact that it was virulently antisemitic and longed for the days of the Tsar’s empire, was long presumed to be infiltrated or controlled by the KGB.²¹ Indeed, when the archives were opened in 1991, it emerged that their leader, Dmitry Vasilyev, had been assigned a code name by the agency: “Vandal.”²² Dugin rose quickly in *Pamyat*, up until the point that he was sitting on the group’s central committee.²³

But in 1988 Dugin was ousted by a rival within the group, Aleksandr Barkashov, who would later lead the neo-Nazi Russian National Unity group.²⁴ From there, Dugin traveled to Western Europe, attending various fascist forums and seminars,²⁵ meeting with fascists ranging from esoteric neo-Nazis like the Thule Society and Miguel Serrano, to the now-influential leaders of the French New Right,²⁶ such as writer and philosopher Alain de Benoist, whose acknowledged influence on his political ideology would be much greater than his on any Western European movement.²⁷

19 “In Moscow, You Can Get a ‘Passport of a Citizen of the Donetsk Republic,’” *The Korrespondent*, June 1, 2012 (in Russian) URL: <https://korrespondent.net/ukraine/politics/1355712-v-moskve-mozhno-poluchit-pasport-grazhdanina-doneckoj-respubliki>

20 Charles Clover, *Black Wind, White Snow* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 2016) p.156

21 “Soviet Union: Information on Pamyat’s relations with the KGB, the militia and the municipal authorities (1988-1991),” Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 1 January 1993. URL: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6abb558.html>

22 Charles Clover, *Black Wind, White Snow* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 2016) p.165.

23 Steven D. Shenfield, *Russian Fascism* (Routledge: Abingdon, 2015) p. 192.

24 Charles Clover, *Black Wind, White Snow* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 2016) p.167.

25 Anton Shekhovtsov, *Russia and the Western Far Right* (Routledge: Abingdon, 2018)p.44.

26 Dana Kennedy, “The French Ideologues Who Inspired the Alt-Right,” *The Daily Beast*, April 13, 2017.

URL: <https://www.thedailybeast.com/the-french-ideologues-who-inspired-the-alt-right>

27 Interview with Dugin Alexander Gelievich , *Pravaya*, February 22, 2006 (in Russian). URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20070317122216/https://www.pravaya.ru/ludi/451/6742>; Anton Shekhovtsov, “Aleksandr Dugin’s Neo-Eurasianism: The New Right à La Russe!,” *Religion Compass* 3, no. 4 (2009): 697–716.

Dugin brought the French New Right back to Moscow when he invited de Benoist to give a presentation at the General Staff Academy of the Armed Forces, where Dugin was a guest lecturer in 1991.²⁸ Dugin's skill at building bridges abroad would be key for his later work in developing extensive networks with Western fascists.

While there has always been a traditionalist core to Dugin's beliefs, his stated ideological framework, impacted so heavily by various meetings and interests, has proved rather malleable over the years. In the 1990s, Dugin co-founded the National Bolshevik Party with Eduard Limonov, a provocateur and punk novelist returning from exile in New York.²⁹ The party, marrying communist and fascist symbols and concepts, often seemed like a postmodern art project, down to its flag, substituting a hammer and sickle for the swastika within the old white and red Nazi banner.

At an event in 1995 honoring the memory of British occultist Aleister Crowley, Dugin and Limonov both gave readings between musical performances and spinning crucifixions, complete with sparklers.³⁰ This was a far cry from the Orthodox persona he would later present on the ultraconservative,³¹ pious Tsargrad TV channel.³² But the ethos with which he is most closely associated is his own fascistic version of the older Russian concept of Eurasianism, a view that has Russia geographically at the center of a great, continent-spanning empire inherently at odds with the maritime powers of the Atlantic.

Dugin's Eurasianism draws significantly on the pseudo-historical chauvinism of the Soviet writer Lev Gumilev.³³ The son of the great Russian Silver Age poet Anna Akhmatova, Gumilev had suffered immensely at the hands of Stalin's regime, spending 16 years in prisons and the gulag. It was during that time that Gumilev concocted some of his first idealized histories of the peoples of the Eurasian steppes. The core of Gumilev's theories is the notion that ethnic groups must go through a set series of phases of development or collapse in response to their geographical environment, which is visible in people's respective levels of *passionarnost*, that is, their capacity to endure suffering and adapt to change.³⁴ *Passionarnost* itself was the result, Gumilev claimed, of varying levels of exposure to cosmic radiation in different parts of the earth.³⁵

One of Gumilev's collaborators and promoters was the philosopher Yuri Borodai, a fellow at

28 Anton Shekhovtsov, *Russia and the Western Far Right* (Routledge:Abingdon, 2018) p.45.

29 Victor Yasmann, "Russia: National Bolsheviks, The Party Of 'Direct Action,'" *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, April 29, 2006. URL: <https://www.rferl.org/a/1058689.html>

30 Hannelore Fobo, "Empire and Magic. Sergey Kuryokhin's "Pop-Mekhanika No. 418""", 2020. URL: <http://www.e-e.eu/Pop-Mekhanika-418-Empire-and-Magic/index8.html>; "Angel 418. In memory of Aleister Crowley (fragments). Kuryokhin, Dugin, Limonov. Autumn 1995," Youtube Video, posted by "Sol Veig", June 18, 2013. URL: <https://youtu.be/X26mgR3wQx0>

31 "The Church Is All of Us: Dugin Stood up for Orthodoxy," *Tsargrad*, August 6, 2021 (in Russian). URL: https://tsargrad.tv/articles/cerkov-jeto-vse-my-dugin-vstal-na-zashhitu-pravoslavija_393481; "Alexander Dugin: Real Orthodoxy is a Real Living Bright Miracle," *Tsargrad*, December 16, 2016 (in Russian). URL: https://tsargrad.tv/articles/aleksandr-dugin-nastojashhee-pravoslavie-jeto-nastojashhee-zhivoe-svetloe-chudo_40351

32 Courtney Weaver, "God's TV, Russian Style," *Financial Times*, October 16, 2015. URL: <https://www.ft.com/content/27125702-71ec-11e5-ad6d-f4ed76f0900a>

33 Anton Shekhovtsov, "Aleksandr Dugin's Neo-Eurasianism: The New Right à La Russe 1," *Religion Compass* 3, no. 4 (2009): 697–716. URL: <https://www.mod-langs.ox.ac.uk/russian/nationalism/shekhovtsov2.html>

34 Charles Clover, "Lev Gumilev: Passion, Putin and Power," *Financial Times*, March 11, 2016. URL: <https://www.ft.com/content/ede1e5c6-e0c5-11e5-8d9b-e88a2a889797>

35 Mark Bassin, "Ethnogenesis, *Passionarnost*, and the Biosphere," *The Gumilev Mystique*, 2016, 43–59. URL: <https://academic.oup.com/cornell-scholarship-online/book/16911/chapter-abstract/174158039>

the Russian Academy of Sciences who wrote an enthusiastic review in the journal *Priroda* (*Nature*) of Gumilev's *Ethnogenesis and Biosphere*, which laid out his core thesis regarding ethnic groups and their environments.³⁶ This was too much of an indulgence of ethnic determinism for the Communist authorities in 1981. Borodai's editor at *Priroda* was dismissed and several other colleagues were reprimanded by the Soviet Academy of Sciences.³⁷

Gumilev remained a family friend until his death in 1992, even though he was "absolutely not a good-natured person" and had "two enemies: the Soviet government and the Jews," whom he regarded as "parasitic."

The person who leveled these judgments against Gumilev was Aleksandr Borodai, Yuri's son, and the first "prime minister" of the Donetsk People's Republic.³⁸



Borodai at a press conference in Donetsk in June 2014.³⁹

36 Yu. M. Borodai, "In search of an ethnogenic factor," *Nature*, 1981 (in Russian). URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20160304203630/http://www.kulichki.com/~gumilev/matter/Article37.htm>

37 Aleksandr Fyodorovich Andreyev, "100 years of the journal *Priroda*", *Elementy*, January, 2012 (in Russian). URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20130131010429/http://elementy.ru/lib/431494>

38 "Gumilev. Poet, politician, passionate," Broadcast (Den TV). URL: <https://denv.ru/programs/kultura/gumilyov-poet-politik-passionarij.html>

39 "Self-Proclaimed Donetsk Republic Names Aleksandr Borodai as Leader," *South China Morning Post*, May 19, 2014. URL: <https://www.scmp.com/news/world/article/1514984/self-proclaimed-donetsk-republic-names-aleksandr-borodai-leader>

In 1992 the 19-year-old Borodai completed his degree in philosophy at Moscow State University. He then volunteered to fight in the conflict that had broken out in eastern Moldova, when the self-declared Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic (PMR) — usually referred to as Transnistria — fought a brief but bloody war, backed by the remnants of the Soviet army, to carve out a thin swathe of territory along the river Dniester opposite the border with Ukraine.⁴⁰ The Transnistrian war was one of the first of a litany of conflicts to break out in former Soviet states as national independence movements rubbed up against territorial borders drawn up in Moscow. In this case, the Moldovan territory along the Dniester River had been settled by a large Russian population, and the PMR's political leadership seized on anxiety around the collapse of the Soviet system and fears of absorption by neighboring Romania, with whom the majority of Moldova's population share a common language. To this day, the PMR retains Soviet iconography, with the unrecognized statelet's coat of arms formed of bushels of wheat and corn flanking the red star and hammer and sickle.

Despite the fact the PMR was not just pro-Russian but essentially a Soviet continuity cause, around 400 volunteers from Ukraine's own far-right UNA-UNSO (Ukrainian National Assembly — Ukrainian People's Self-Defense) paramilitary organization were also fighting on the separatist side.⁴¹

A few years after the conclusion of the conflict, Valery Litskay, then-state secretary of the PMR who had previously served as a KGB officer in Cuba and had "retired," admitted that the Kremlin had supported the separatist movement in Moldova and other outbound republics in the dying days of the Soviet Union.⁴²

Other separatist statelets supported by the Kremlin in this period included Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which broke away from Georgia. And this model would later reappear in very much the same manner in the Ukrainian regions of Donetsk and Luhansk that sprouted "People's Republics" in 2014. Despite the Soviet symbolism employed by many of these movements, none became socialist states by any measure.

Another key PMR official who became acquainted with Borodai in 1992 was Vladimir Antyufeyev.⁴³ Before traveling to Transnistria, Antyufeyev, a Russian national, had served in the police in Soviet-ruled Latvia where he had been a police commander. Antyufeyev allegedly ordered riot police to use deadly violence when the security forces failed to put down pro-independence protesters in January 1991.⁴⁴

Antyufeyev moved to Transnistria at the end of that year and adopted the pseudonym "Vadim

40 "Aleksandr Yurevich Borodai Biography", TASS (in Russian). URL: <https://tass.ru/encyclopedia/person/boroday-aleksandr-yurevich>

41 Mike Lvovsky, "20 Years of Conflict in Transnistria. UNA-UNSO: 'Ukrainians Were Dying, and We Had to Protect Them,'" *Segodnya*, June 19, 2012. URL: <https://world.segodnya.ua/world/20-let-konfliktu-v-pridnecetrove-una-unco-pohibali-ukraintsy-i-my-dolzhny-byli-ikh-zashchishchat-308277.html>

42 Jamestown Foundation, The Kremlin 'Specialist for Creating New Independent States' Moves to Eastern Ukraine, 21 July 2014, *Eurasia Daily Monitor* Volume: 11 Issue: 132. URL: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/53d0ff844.html>

43 Daniel McLaughlin, "Shadowy Veteran of Pro-Russian Rebellions in Ukraine," *The Irish Times*, July 30, 2014. URL: <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/europe/shadowy-veteran-of-pro-russian-rebellions-in-ukraine-1.1881817>

44 "Latvia Has Long Stopped the Search for the Ex-Riot Policeman and Deputy Prime Minister of the DPR," *Delfi*, July 29, 2014 (in Russian). URL: <https://rus.delfi.lv/news/daily/latvia/latviya-davno-prekratila-rozysk-eks-omonovca-i-vice-premera-dnr.d?id=44784014>

Shevtsov,” under which he would serve as the PMR’s head of the “Ministry of State Security” (as the successor to the KGB was then known) until his return to Russia in 2012.⁴⁵ Just two years later, Antyufeyev reappeared under his original name in Donetsk, where he was named “vice premier” of the Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) from July 10 until Sept. 23, during which time he briefly replaced Borodai as “prime minister” of the DNR while the latter was receiving instruction in Moscow.

As in Ukraine, the survival of the PMR was ultimately ensured by the direct intervention of the Russian armed forces. In late June 1992, Maj. Gen. Aleksandr Lebed, who had led Soviet airborne forces in suppressing independence movements in Azerbaijan and Georgia but had rejected the orders of the failed KGB coup in 1991, took over the Russian 14th Army, which had been stationed in eastern Moldova before the collapse.⁴⁶ Lebed gave the order to attack Moldovan forces, achieving a decisive blow and ending the conflict.⁴⁷

But back home, Russia was in a parlous state. In Moscow, the nationalists were in the ascendancy. The economic disaster wrought by the government’s inept transition to market capitalism and apparent indifference to the suffering that resulted was a boon to the radicals on both fringes of the political spectrum.

By the summer of 1993, Boris Yeltsin had lost the support of the Supreme Soviet, where a developing coalition of communists and nationalists outnumbered his supporters. In April that year, a referendum was held, asking Russians four questions — whether they had confidence in the president; whether they approved of economic reforms; and whether they wanted early presidential or parliamentary elections.⁴⁸ Yeltsin received majority approvals for the first two as well as the last questions, and, just as importantly, a rejection on the third.

The president and the Supreme Soviet were soon openly contradicting each other over appointments and decrees. Portentously, in August, the Soviet passed a resolution affirming that the city of Sevastopol in newly independent Ukrainian Crimea was part of the Russian Federation.⁴⁹

Things reached a climax in September when Yeltsin ordered the dissolution of the Supreme Soviet, which reacted by voting for his impeachment and proclaiming Vice President Aleksandr Rutskoy, whom Yeltsin had tried and failed to dismiss weeks earlier, as his replacement. Yeltsin then ordered the armed forces to surround the White House — the building that housed the Soviet and now hosts the State Duma — to which flocked both protesters and returning nationalist combatants. Among them was Borodai, who arrived with a group of fellow veterans of the Transnistrian war.⁵⁰

45 Jamestown Foundation, The Kremlin ‘Specialist for Creating New Independent States’ Moves to Eastern Ukraine, 21 July 2014, Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 11 Issue: 132. URL: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/53d0ff844.html>

46 “Alexander Lebed,” *The Telegraph*, April 29, 2002. URL: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1392499/Alexander-Lebed.html>

47 Irina F. Selivanova, “Trans-Dniestria” in “U.S. and Russian Policymaking With Respect to the Use of Force”, RAND Conference Proceedings Series, 1996. URL: https://web.archive.org/web/20070804114400/http://www.rand.org/pubs/conf_proceedings/CF129/CF-129.chapter4.html

48 Arkady Ostrovsky, *The Invention of Russia* (Atlantic Books: London, 2015) p160.

49 *Resolution of the Supreme Council of the Russian Federation On the Status of the City of Sevastopol*, July 9, 1993, No. 5359-1. <http://sevkrimrus.narod.ru/ZAKON/sewastop.htm>

50 “Black October,” broadcast (Den TV). URL: <https://dentv.ru/programs/obschestvo/chernyy-oktyabr.html>

Borodai joined up with the security service of the National Salvation Front, a red-brown alliance of nationalist and leftist parties, and served under Duma deputy Ilya Konstantinov, who was one of the leaders of the paramilitary defense of the White House.⁵¹

On Oct. 3, Konstantinov and several other high-profile opposition members, including Soviet army Gen. Albert Makashov, led supporters of the Supreme Soviet in a convoy of trucks to seize the national television studios at Ostankino in the north of Moscow. Ruslan Khasbulatov, chair of the Supreme Soviet, recounted⁵² over a decade later that he had not understood where the idea of capturing Ostankino came from and that he suspected the involvement of provocateurs.

What happened next would be a defining moment in the development of post-Soviet Russia, marking the retreat into violent authoritarianism. While largely forgotten in the West, the events at Ostankino and the White House would form a central part of the mythology of the Russian far right.

Suggestions that the move on Ostankino was a planned provocation abound in Russian nationalist circles. One of the most conspiratorial takes, and a key reference text for the nationalist history of what happened during these events is the book *Anathema*, written in 1995 by Marat Musin under the pseudonym "Ivan Ivanov."⁵³

Musin was a defender of the Supreme Soviet who would later found the ANNA (Abkhazian Network News Agency) propaganda outlet.⁵⁴ Musin claimed that the convoy of protesters headed to the TV center had stopped at a checkpoint on the Moscow ring road, manned by troops from the Interior Ministry's Dzerzhinsky unit, but were then, inexplicably, allowed to continue.⁵⁵

The politicians and protesters supporting the Supreme Soviet against Yeltsin came from a wide range of political positions, but the dominance of both communists and ultranationalists was demonstrated at Ostankino by the flag bearers on the steps of the studios, holding both the red flag and the black, yellow and white tricolor of the Russian Empire. Moreover, it was Makashov's use of the old antisemitic Soviet phrase "Suitcase! Airport! Israel!" (as in where the Jewish enemies of the *ancien regime* should go) in addressing the incumbent authorities that drew some of the loudest cheers that afternoon.⁵⁶

Konstantinov was one of the main speakers outside the TV center, but it is unclear whether Borodai followed him there that day. Both Dugin and Limonov were in the crowd.

51 "Alexander Borodai visited Zakhar Prilepin," Youtube Video, posted by "Union of Volunteers of Donbass", February 27, 2017.

URL: <https://youtu.be/x3Hp0sL0Jpl>

52 Vladimir Kara-Murza, "'October 1993: Did the Winners Lose?,'" broadcast, Edges of Time (Radio Liberty, October 6, 2014) (in Russian). URL: <https://memohrc.org/ru/monitorings/oktyabr-93-go-pobedivshie-proigrali>

53 Vladislav Shurygin, "Five Lives of Marat Musin," *Zavtra*, May 7, 2018. URL: https://zavtra.ru/blogs/pyat_zhiznej_marta_musina
Sergey Kotkalo, "Legend of Resistance - on the Death of Marat Musin," *Anna-News*, May 5, 2018 (in Russian). URL: <https://anna-news.info/legenda-soprotivleniya-na-smert-marata-musina/>

54 Kanishk Karan et al., "Facebook Removes Russian Propaganda Outlet in Ukraine," Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab), May 5, 2020. URL: <https://medium.com/dfrlab/facebook-removes-propaganda-outlets-linked-to-russian-security-services-51f6e2f6b841>

55 Ivan Ivanov, *Anathema* (Paleya:1995) p235.

56 "Anpilov, Konstantinov, Makashov. October 3, 1993, Ostankino," Youtube Video, posted by "Trudovaya Rossiya", August 7, 2022. URL: <https://youtu.be/8RqQrvj33M>



Screenshot from YouTube video of protesters outside Ostankino TV Center on Oct. 3, 1993.⁵⁷

While it is generally accepted that a sniper with the security forces fired the first shot that evening, wounding a protester in the leg, what precipitated the hail of automatic gunfire is still a contentious issue, with debate over whether a rocket-propelled grenade was fired into the building first.⁵⁸ Certainly, an explosion did take place inside the foyer.⁵⁹

Members of the Vityaz special forces unit opened fire on the crowd with machine guns, killing dozens and wounding hundreds. The dead included five journalists from France, the U.K. and the United States. Official numbers for the death toll were as low as 45, while contemporary reports cited medical authorities saying 62 people had died and 400 were wounded.⁶⁰ Many supporters of the

57 Ibid.

58 Alexander Cherkasov, "First Shot and First Blood," *Polit.Ru*, October 5, 2005 (in Russian). URL: <https://polit.ru/article/2005/10/05/ostankino/>

59 "Unique footage taken at the entrance to the ASK-3 building of the Ostankino Television Center (03.10.1993)," Youtube Video, posted by "Oktyabr' 1993", January 2, 2022. URL: <https://youtu.be/2k-Z9Bvxva0>.

60 Jonathan Steele and David Hearst, "Yeltsin Crushes Revolt," *The Guardian*, October 5, 1993. URL: <https://www.theguardian>.

Supreme Soviet estimated far higher death tolls.

With the momentum turned at Ostankino, Yeltsin gave the order the following day for tanks to shell the White House. One of those in attendance when the first salvo was fired was 21-year-old Olga Kulygina.⁶¹

Another participant in the Transnistrian war, Kulygina first met Borodai there while she was purportedly conducting humanitarian work. Borodai would later say, standing beside her, that she had “been fighting since 1992.”⁶² Having returned to Moscow, she was officially part of the medical volunteer staff supporting the Soviet, headed by Col. Vyacheslav Yakushenkov, with whom she would later bear a child.

Kulygina claimed that at the White House she witnessed atrocities as Spetsnaz forces stormed the Supreme Soviet, shooting unarmed medics and killing large numbers of people, including teenagers.⁶³ Musin, who was godfather to Kulygina’s son and would later collaborate with her in propagandizing for the Assad regime in Syria, claims that she prevented the summary execution of Yakushenkov by standing with him as the security forces prepared to shoot. She would later reemerge in eastern Ukraine wielding an automatic rifle.⁶⁴

By the time the siege was over, at least 127 corpses had been taken out of the burned-out White House, with around 600 people reported injured.⁶⁵ Khasbulatov and several other defenders of the Soviet claim that the death toll was as high as 1,500.⁶⁶

com/world/1993/oct/05/russia.davidhearst

61 “Sanctions List Search,” Office of Foreign Asset Control. URL: <https://sanctionssearch.ofac.treas.gov/Details.aspx?id=37678>

62 Alexander Chalenko, “Aleksandr Borodai: We Will Go to the War in Donbass with Pleasure,” August 31, 2015 (in Russian). URL: <https://ukraina.ru/20150831/1014139858.html>

63 “Black October,” broadcast (Den TV). URL: <https://dentv.ru/programs/obschestvo/chernyy-oktyabr.html>

64 Marat Musin, “Russian Officer Vyacheslav Ivanovich Yakushenkov,” Live Journal, January 3, 2012 (in Russian). URL: <https://nashenasledie.livejournal.com/1204113.html>; Marat Musin, “Al Hula: Ordinary Fascism of the ‘Civilized World’. First Witness,” *Moskovskiy Komsomolets (MK)*, May 30, 2012 (in Russian). URL: <https://www.mk.ru/blogs/posts/al-hula-obyiknovennyiy-fashizm-tsivilizovannogo-mira-pervyyi-svidetel.html>; Marat Musin, *Revenge of the President, or How the power of the people was shot* (EKSMO, Moscow: 2010).

65 “Bodies Removed from Russian White House,” *UPI*, October 5, 1993. URL: <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1993/10/05/Bodies-removed-from-Russian-White-House/8057749793600/>

66 Vladimir Kara-Murza, “‘October 1993: Did the Winners Lose?’,” broadcast, *Edges of Time* (Radio Liberty, October 6, 2014) (in Russian). URL: <https://memohrc.org/ru/monitorings/oktyabr-93-go-pobedivshie-proigrali>



Borodai speaking with Kulygina about the events of 1993 on Zavtra's Den' TV, 2012.⁶⁷

With his rule secured by force, Yeltsin drafted a new constitution granting the presidency far greater powers, including the right to choose the prime minister, military leadership and security council membership without the need for parliamentary approval. Furthermore the president was now safe from impeachment for violating the constitution and could veto bills that received less than two-thirds of votes in the Duma.

Borodai spent the remainder of the '90s as a journalist writing for an ultranationalist newspaper, *Zavtra* (*Tomorrow*), run by Aleksandr Prokhanov, a former foreign correspondent for the weekly newspaper *Literaturnaya Gazeta* who had reported from Cambodia, Nicaragua and Afghanistan.

A diehard supporter of the Soviet regime and military, Prokhanov had been one of the leading intellectual supporters of the failed coup against Mikhail Gorbachev in 1991. Vehemently opposed to Yeltsin and his liberal reforms, Prokhanov had embraced a mixture of messianic nationalism and veneration for the Soviet state, in particular for Stalin. He had sided with his friend Makashov during the 1993 crisis, using his newspaper *Den'* (*Day*) to agitate against the government. As a result, *Den'* was banned by Yeltsin in the immediate aftermath of the White House siege. *Zavtra* was, logically, the successor to *Den'*.

Alongside writing for *Zavtra*, Borodai also freelanced for several Russian news outlets, including the state-owned RIA Novosti and the NTV television channel, reporting on the First Chechen War

⁶⁷ "Black October," broadcast (Den TV). URL: <https://dentv.ru/programs/obschestvo/chernyy-oktyabr.html>

in 1994, and then conflicts in Abkhazia and Tajikistan.⁶⁸ In 1996, Kulygina introduced Borodai to another Russian nationalist, a mustachioed monarchist named Igor Girkin.⁶⁹

Like Borodai, Girkin (then 25) was a Muscovite and a veteran of the Transnistrian war, although the two hadn't crossed paths in the separatist region, having fought in different areas.⁷⁰ By his own admission, Girkin had caught what he called "gunpowder syndrome" in combat and chose to stay at war.⁷¹

Along with two of his comrades from the Transnistrian war, he joined a Russian volunteer unit, referred to by media as the Tsarist Wolves, bound for Bosnia. Having studied to be a historian, Girkin maintained notes on his military escapades there and later published his *Bosnian Diaries* in a journal for veterans of the FSB's Alfa anti-terror unit in 1999.

On his return from Bosnia in 1993, he entered the regular Russian armed forces and was soon dispatched to Chechnya as part of a mechanized infantry unit.

While Girkin has often been labeled as an agent of the GRU (Russian military intelligence) by media and government bodies, including on the European Union sanctions list, there is no evidence supporting such a claim. However, it can be confirmed that he served as an officer in the FSB.

Sources include both his own personal emails, which were breached and posted online by the Russian hacker group *Sholtay Boltay* ("Humpty Dumpty") in 2014, in which Girkin indicated that he worked in an FSB counterterrorism unit from 1996 until March 2013. Flight records viewed by Russian newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* showed that Girkin had booked a flight in 2005 using an FSB employee registration number.⁷² Eventually, Girkin himself admitted that he had retired from the FSB with the rank of colonel just before the invasion.⁷³

Under his nom de guerre "Igor Strelkov," Girkin began writing for Prokhanov's *Zavtra* in 1998.⁷⁴ Borodai and Girkin even co-wrote a special report for *Zavtra* in September 1999 when they covered the Russian military operation to restore state control over the so-called Kadar Zone, where Islamists, supported by fighters based in then-independent Chechnya, had taken control of several villages and declared these the Islamic Jamaat of Dagestan.⁷⁵

68 "Prokhanov: Borodai Brought White Imperial Nationalism to Donbass," *Natsionalnaya Sluzhba Novostei*, May 20, 2014 (in Russian). URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20140522180147/https://nsn.fm/2014/05/20/e-kspert-prem-er-ministrom-dnr-stal-zaby-ty-j-v-rossii-marginal/>

69 Yekaterina Larina, "Aleksandr Borodai: I could return, but not to Donbas but already to Kyiv", *Argumenty i Fakty*, April 11, 2016. URL: https://aif.ru/politics/world/aleksandr_boroday_ya_mogu_vernutsya_no_ne_na_donbass_a_uzhe_v_kiev

70 Stepan Opalev, "Aleksandr Borodai: 'It's Just That I, Leontiev and Strelkov Have Known Each Other for a Long Time' ," *RBC* , May 26, 2014 (in Russian). URL: <https://www.rbc.ru/newspaper/2014/05/26/56bea07a9a7947299f72d02d>

71 Igor Girkin, "Bosnian Diary," *Newspaper of the Association of Veterans of Anti-Terror Division Alfa*, April 1999 (in Russian). URL: https://sharlib.com/read_530535-1

72 Sergey Kanev and Valery Shiryaev, "Ukraine: There Is an Unprecedented War Going on Here. It Is Commanded by Russian PR Agencies and Political Technologists. ... And People Are Dying for Real," *Novaya Gazeta*, May 26, 2014 (in Russian). URL: <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2014/05/26/59707-prizraki-voyny>

73 "Strelkov Told How He Served in the FSB and Where He Fought," *Moskovskiy Komsomolets (MK)*, December 7, 2014 (in Russian). URL: <https://www.mk.ru/politics/2014/07/12/strelkov-rasskazal-kak-sluzhil-v-fsb-i-gde-voeval.html>

74 "Igor Strelkov", *Zavtra* Profile, URL: <https://zavtra.ru/blogs/authors/1856>

75 Alexander Borodai and Igor Strelkov , "Kadar Zone: Reporting from Dagestan ," *Zavtra* , September 28, 1999 (in Russian). URL: <https://zavtra.ru/blogs/1999-09-2821>

Beyond being a monarchist and revanchist, Girkin adheres to a conspiratorial view of international history, in which secretive “puppeteers” are working to undermine Russia through intricate orchestrations. Take these excerpts from one of his 1999 *Zavtra* articles, which reads like blog posts from the American conspiracist right, either at that time or today, in the era of QAnon:⁷⁶

Let's move on, finally, to the third part of the act of this performance played out by the constructors of the “new world order” - to long-suffering Chechnya. ... The plans of those who steer conflicts from their silent offices are perfectly clear: to provoke a coordinated series of armed conflicts in the North Caucasus. Then, economic, external and internal political factors come into play, capable of leading to a serious internal cataclysm and a new “parade of sovereignties” — the breakup of the Russian Federation. In the existing situation, only decisive strikes against the bands of militants and their rapid defeat can tear up the plans of the “puppeteers”. Any delay, time-wasting or indecision — is a crime, because it will condemn us to another defeat. Comrades, officers! Don't you think we have been on the back foot for long enough?

It is important to recall that this was written while Girkin was a serving officer in the FSB.

The language is strikingly reminiscent of some of the narratives coming from Russian politicians and propagandists since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. For example, former Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev has claimed that “if Russia stops the special military operation without achieving victory, it will be torn into pieces.”⁷⁷

Unsurprisingly, Girkin is an antisemite. In 2018, he declared that the Holocaust had been motivated in Eastern Europe by a desire for “revenge” for what he claimed was a Jewish-dominated campaign of genocide by the Bolsheviks and that only “600-800 thousand people of Jewish nationality, or those with a touch of Jewish blood... no ‘6 million’ (or even 2-3 million)” had been murdered.⁷⁸ He concluded his blog post with the claim that the Holocaust had been amplified and exploited at the cost of the memory of Russians killed in the Soviet era, calling this “vile hypocrisy and an example of

76 Igor Strelkov, “Technology of Betrayal,” *Zavtra*, August 9, 1999 (in Russian) URL: <https://zavtra.ru/blogs/1999-08-1041>

77 Dmitry Medvedev, Telegram, February 22, 2022 (in Russian). URL: https://t.me/medvedev_telegram/272

78 Igor Strelkov, VKontakte, July 1, 2018 (in Russian). URL: https://vk.com/igoristrelkov?w=wall347260249_317100

the 'double standards' so favored by the Jewish financial oligarchy and their stooges."

A few weeks before Girkin and Borodai had set off to Dagestan to report for *Zavtra*, Yeltsin had appointed a new prime minister — Putin. He set right to work on giving the nationalist adventurers what they wanted most — a victorious war to reconquer lost Russian territory in Chechnya. Despite being Yeltsin's hand-picked successor, Putin eventually won the hearts of many of the losers of 1993.

Borodai, apparently begrudgingly, said in 2013 that the Putin government had "in a certain way, later on legitimized itself" — indicating that Putin's revanchism appealed to his own politics.⁷⁹

This mirrored Prokhanov's comments a year later, when he stated that Putin had "proclaimed the primacy of spiritual values": "This is an enormous movement of worldview. This gives hope that all will be well with Russia."⁸⁰

This was, of course, the year that Putin launched a war that would drag on for nine years (and counting), costing hundreds of thousands of Russian lives.

79 "October Tragedy," *Zavtra*, October 4, 2013 (in Russian). URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20140928102229/http://www.zavtra.ru/content/view/1993/>

80 Alexander Prokhanov, "It's Time to Plow the Russian Field," *Argumenty i Fakty (AIF)*, September 4, 2014 (in Russian). URL: https://aif.ru/society/opinion/russkoe_pole_pora_vspahat

Chapter 2. The First Invasion of Ukraine

Borodai and Girkin first arrived in Crimea during the takeover of the peninsula by Russian forces disguised as “self-defense” militias — conventional Russian soldiers without insignias on their uniforms parodically dubbed “little green men” by Ukrainians — at the end of February 2014.

At that time, both Girkin and Borodai⁸¹ were working for Marshall Capital, a Moscow-based company owned by the ultra-Orthodox Russian oligarch Konstantin Malofeyev (then 40), a figure closely connected to the SVR, Russia’s Foreign Intelligence Service.⁸² The son of an astrophysicist, Malofeyev had built his fortune from banking and skillful investments in telecoms in the late ‘90s and had, from 2007 onward, spent heavily on promoting “traditional values,” Orthodox Christianity and, under the guise of his Safe Internet League NGO, online censorship.⁸³

To this day, Malofeyev has employed Dugin as editor-in-chief of his Tsargrad TV channel. He is also a key lynchpin between the Russian state and various far-right and Christian conservative movements across the West, including the U.S.-based World Congress of Families, which lobbies around the world to ban abortion and block LGBTQ rights.⁸⁴

Malofeyev is also the connective tissue between the purportedly autonomous paramilitaries in Ukraine and the Kremlin.⁸⁵ The U.S. Treasury Department has serially sanctioned him, first in 2014 for his financing of the DNR and his encouragement of separatism in Crimea; he has also been indicted by the U.S. Justice Department for violating U.S. sanctions on Russia. In fact, when the Treasury Department first sanctioned Malofeyev, it explicitly cited his associations with two Russian combatants in Donbas: Borodai and Girkin.

Borodai would later tell the BBC Russian Service the following year that he and Girkin had traveled to Crimea to work as advisers to the Russian-appointed “prime minister” of occupied Crimea, Sergei Aksyonov, known in organized crime circles as “Goblin.”⁸⁶

81 Stepan Opalev, “Aleksandr Borodai: ‘It’s Just That I, Leontiev and Strelkov Have Known Each Other for a Long Time’,” *RBC*, May 26, 2014 (in Russian). URL: <https://www.rbc.ru/newspaper/2014/05/26/56bea07a9a7947299f72d02d>

82 The Bell, “Russia’s ‘Orthodox Tycoon’ Is Bankrolling a Monarchist Movement. But Where Does He Get His Money?,” *The Moscow Times*, November 25, 2019. URL: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/11/25/russias-orthodox-tycoon-is-bankrolling-a-monarchist-movement-but-where-does-he-get-his-money-a68301>

83 Max Seddon, “Russia’s Chief Internet Censor Enlists China’s Know-How,” *Financial Times*, April 27, 2016. URL: <https://www.ft.com/content/08564d74-0bbf-11e6-9456-444ab5211a2f>

84 Jasper Jackson et al., “Unholy Alliance: The Far-Right Religious Network Attacking Reproductive and LGBTQ+ Rights,” *The Bureau of Investigative Journalism*, September 25, 2022. URL: <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/stories/2022-09-25/unholy-alliance-the-far-right-religious-network-attacking-reproductive-and-lgbtq-rights>

85 Christo Grozev, “The Kremlin’s Balkan Gambit: Part I,” *Bellingcat*, March 4, 2017. URL: <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2017/03/04/kremlins-balkan-gambit-part/>

86 “Borodai: ‘Conflict Is a Good Time for My Business,’” *BBC Russia Service*, January 12, 2015. https://www.bbc.com/russian/international/2015/01/150106_borodai_interview; Katherine Haddon, “New Putin-Backed Prime Minister In Crimea Used To Be A Gangster Named ‘Goblin,’” *The Insider*, March 11, 2014. URL: <https://www.businessinsider.com/new-prime-minister-in-crimea-used-to-be-a-gangster-named-goblin-2014-3?r=US&IR=T>

Asked why he had been invited to work with Aksyonov “as a specialist,” Borodai replied:

Apparently, because he knew that I am not just a specialist but also a Russian patriot. Really, this is the pure truth. Well, and accordingly, we have shared acquaintances. Since the idea of reunifying Crimea with Russia was close to me, I was ready to work. On an absolutely unpaid basis.

But neither Borodai nor Girkin would remain for long in Crimea, which Russian troops took control of on Feb. 27, 2014. Both had more ambitious plans in eastern Ukraine’s Donbas region, where anti-Maidan protests, curated by pro-Russian groups, began popping up over the following month, followed by the seizure of administrative buildings by paramilitaries.

Allegations that Borodai, like Girkin, was an officer of the FSB had been circulating for years before he appeared in Donetsk, encouraged, to no small degree, by an article published in 2002 by the Agency of Political News (APN) news website.⁸⁷ It claimed that a 35-year-old “philosopher,” Borodai, holding the rank of major general in the FSB, had been appointed as deputy director of the service.

This clearly apocryphal claim would often be cited in future years, especially after the outbreak of war in Ukraine. Borodai himself dismissed it as a joke; a rare instance in which he is likely telling the truth, at least to some extent.⁸⁸ He was never deputy director of the FSB and the notion that he held a rank as high as major general by the age of 35 seems fanciful, to say the least.

However, subsequent revelations confirming Borodai’s close relationship with the service raise the possibility that the APN piece was inspired by genuine rumors he was at least collaborating with the FSB, and possibly an agent recruited by it.

Phone calls intercepted by the Ukrainian Security Service (SBU), and later used as evidence by the Joint Investigation Team into the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 on July 17, 2014, by a Russian surface-to-air missile in eastern Ukraine, demonstrated that Borodai had been in regular contact with an individual, who was identified a year later as Andrei Burlaka, a colonel general in the FSB, who gave him instructions.⁸⁹ Borodai himself boasted in one intercepted call that he answered only to the *Kontora* (“the Office”), a Russian slang term for the FSB.⁹⁰

87 “New Leadership Comes to Lubyanka,” APN, July 25, 2002 (in Russian). URL: <https://www.apn.ru/news/article13719.htm>

88 “Alexander Borodai visited Zakhar Prilepin,” Youtube Video, posted by “Union of Volunteers of Donbass”, February 27, 2017. URL: <https://youtu.be/x3HpOsLQJpl>

89 “MH-17 Investigation,” *Politie Netherlands*, February 8, 2023, Joint Investigation Team (JIT). URL: <https://www.politie.nl/en/information/witness-appeal-crash-mh17.html>; “Key MH17 Figure Identified As Senior FSB Official: Colonel General Andrey Burlaka,” *Bellingcat*, April 28, 2020. URL: <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/2020/04/28/Burlaka/>

90 Oliver Carroll, “MH17 Investigators Release Phone Call Records Linking Russian Authorities to Suspects,” *The Independent*,

Another call, also intercepted by the SBU on April 13, 2014, revealed that Borodai and Girkin had been working together from the very outset of the campaign for Donbas in close proximity with both Aksyonov and Malofeyev.⁹¹ The Joint Investigation found that a day after Girkin and a group of armed “volunteers” seized several key administrative buildings in the Donbas town of Sloviansk:

Girkin received a call from Borodai in Moscow. ... Borodai passed the phone to Konstantin Malofeyev, a Russian oligarch who was also involved in the annexation of the Crimea. Girkin said that they had managed to repel a Ukrainian attack. Malofeyev then asked if he had already reported this to Aksyonov. When Girkin said that he had not been able to reach him yet, Malofeyev replied that he had a meeting with Aksyonov in Moscow the next day and that Girkin needed to contact him before then.

The Sholtay Boltay email leaks later revealed that Girkin and Borodai had been working together on plans for Donbas well before the former turned up in Sloviansk, sending back revisions of a draft text of an appeal to the citizens of eastern Ukraine to rise up against the new government in Kyiv. Girkin had been working on this text with Borodai as early as March 21, 2014. The emails show that Borodai was keen to edit down Girkin’s waffling rhetoric and remove some phrases that he said were “absolutely impossible for the head of a Russian Federal subject.” It is not clear who the intended named author would be.

The last draft seen in the emails, from March 30, does not appear to have been published in a recognizable version. It concludes with the following lines, preempting the deployment of Russian military forces: “With regards to Russia, I am sure she is ready to help her brothers! ... But before we call our brothers for help, you must begin the fight against the uninvited guests yourselves! And do this right now!”

It was not until May 16 that Borodai actually emerged in Donbas, when it was announced that he had been selected as the “prime minister” of the new “Donetsk People’s Republic.” Girkin became

November 14, 2019. URL: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/mh17-malaysia-airlines-flight-investigation-ukraine-evidence-russia-rebels-latest-a9202736.html>; David Wise, “Closing Down the K.G.B.,” *The New York Times Magazine*, November 24, 1991. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/1991/11/24/magazine/closing-down-the-kgb.html>

91 “One of the Leaders of the Separatists, According to the SBU Records, Is a pro-Kremlin PR Man,” *Ukrainska Pravda*, April 14, 2014 (in Russian). URL: <https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2014/04/14/7022426/>; “Findings of the JIT MH17 investigation into the crew members of the Buk TELAR and those responsible in the chain of command,” Joint Investigation Team, February 2023. URL: https://www.politie.nl/binaries/content/assets/politie/onderwerpen/mh17/report_jit-mh17_8-februari-2023_eng.pdf

his “defense minister.”⁹²

Prokhanov was delighted with the news and made it clear that he viewed the DNR as a nationalist project, saying of Borodai, whom he viewed as a proponent of “Russian nationalism of the white, and not the red imperial consciousness.”⁹³

Borodai became the face of the DNR, providing a more urbane and media-savvy spokesperson than the austere and brittle Girkin and rather more uncouth paramilitaries. But he also presided over a massive centralization of power. After less than two weeks in office, there was a clear changing of the guard. A new paramilitary formation, the Vostok Battalion, headed by a defected Ukrainian police commander but made up of veterans of Russia’s periphery wars, arrived in Donetsk.⁹⁴ On May 28, 2014, armed Vostok fighters entered the Donetsk Regional State Administration building and evicted the separatist activists and fighters who had occupied the building since March.⁹⁵ To make it clear that the revolutionary phase of the separatist movement was over, the protest barricades outside the building were removed by bulldozers.⁹⁶

92 Elizabeth Sergina and Sergei Smirnov, “Oleksandr Boroday, Former Consultant of Marshal Capital, Elected Prime Minister of Donetsk Republic,” *Vedomosti*, May 16, 2014 (in Russian). URL: <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2014/05/16/premerom-doneckoj-respubliki-izbran-aleksandr-borodaj>

93 “Prokhanov: Borodai Brought White Imperial Nationalism to Donbass,” *NSN (Natsionalnaya Sluzhba Novostey)*, May 20, 2014 (in Russian). URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20140522180147/https://nsn.fm/2014/05/20/e-kspert-prem-er-ministrom-dnr-stal-zaby-ty-j-v-rossii-marginal/>

94 Alec Luhn, “Volunteers or Paid Fighters? The Vostok Battalion Looms Large in War with Kie,” *The Guardian*, June 6, 2014. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/06/the-vostok-battalion-shaping-the-eastern-ukraine-conflict>

95 Courtney Weaver and Roman Olearchyk, “Ukraine Crisis: Paramilitaries Seize Donetsk Rebels’ HQ,” *The Financial Times*, May 29, 2014. URL: <https://www.ft.com/content/d077cbfa-e75b-11e3-8b4e-00144feabdc0>; Lina Kushch, “Activists Replant Russian Flag above HQ in Ukraine City,” *Reuters*, March 5, 2014. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-donetsk-evacuation-idUSBREA240JC20140305>

96 “Ukraine Army Will Push on with Offensive against Rebels - Defence Minister,” *Reuters*, May 30, 2014. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-ukraine-crisis-defence-idINKBNOEA0MJ20140530>



Girkin and Borodai at a press conference in Donetsk on July 10, 2014.

In contrast, things were going much worse in Sloviansk. Girkin's military takeover of the town, which was formally under the control of the self-declared "people's mayor," Vyacheslav Ponomaryov, was the beginning of a standoff with Ukrainian government forces that developed into a siege of the town, lasting from April 26 until July 5.

A number of atrocities were committed under his watch, including the abduction and murder of four members of a Pentecostal Church, and the torture and murder of Horlivka council member Volodymyr Rybak, 19-year-old student Yuri Popravka and 25-year-old Yuri Dyakovsky.⁹⁷ The bodies of the three men were found disemboweled on a riverbank outside Sloviansk on April 19, 2014. Years later, Girkin accepted that their deaths were "under [his] responsibility to some extent."⁹⁸

97 Scott Peterson, "A Ukrainian Murder Mystery Ensnarers a Church in Former Rebel Stronghold," *The Christian Science Monitor*, August 12, 2014. URL: <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2014/0812/A-Ukrainian-murder-mystery-ensnarers-a-church-in-former-rebel-stronghold>; Redakcja Serwisu, "Kidnaping and Assassination of Volodymyr Rybak: Terrorists Have Cruelly Dealt with a Member of Horlivka City Council," Open Dialogue Foundation, July 10, 2014. URL: <https://en.odfoundation.eu/a/6114,kidnaping-and-assassination-of-volodymyr-rybak-terrorists-have-cruelly-dealt-with-a-member-of-horlivka-city-council/>; Halya Coynash, "Unmarked Grave Uncovered of People Killed during Russian Armed and Led Occupation of Sloviansk in 2014," Human Rights in Ukraine, August 20, 2020. URL: <https://khp.org/en/1597801489>

98 "Girkin Confessed to Killing Three Ukrainians," *Gordon Ukraine*, May 18, 2020. (In Ukrainian) URL: <https://gordonua.com/news/war/girkin-priznalsya-v-ubiystve-troih-ukraincev-1500414.html>



Girkin in Donetsk, July 2014.

Girkin also presided over a tribunal created to implement martial law in the town. Using a 1941 decree issued by Stalin, he imposed the death penalty on at least three locals.⁹⁹ Two of them, separatist paramilitaries Dmytro Slavov and Mykola Lukyanov, were accused of “marauding, armed robbery, kidnapping and abandonment of their military positions,” while another, civilian Oleksiy Pichko, had allegedly stolen “two shirts and a pair of pants” from a neighbor’s home. Girkin’s men interrogated them, tried them and having found them guilty, wrapped foil around their heads before a firing squad shot them in the back of their skulls.

Kulygina was also in Sloviansk. Despite her cover story of being “an academic expert on management theory” at the Plekhanov Russian University of Economics in Moscow, she was documented by the Dutch photojournalist Pierre Crom on May 2, running round central Sloviansk, wielding an AKS-74 assault rifle.¹⁰⁰

99 Christopher Miller, “The Executioners of Slovyansk: RFE/RL Puts Names, Faces to Death Squad,” *RadioFreeEurope/Radioliberty*, July 23, 2020. URL: <https://www.rferl.org/a/the-executioners-of-slovyansk/30743132.html>

100 Olga Kuligina Academic Profile (Plekhanov Russian University of Economics; Moscow). <http://www.fmen-rea.ru/chair/management/sostav-professorov-i-prepodavatelej/kulyigina-olga-ivanovna.html>



Olga Kulygina in Sloviansk with an assault rifle on May 2, 2014. Photo: Pierre Crom.

The sight of the “academic,” dressed much like she had for interviews with Borodai on Den’ TV, maintaining trigger discipline while running around with balaclava-clad soldiers, is the starkest illustration that Russian intelligence assets working in the information space are also soldiers who can be deployed in combat.

Later that month, Kulygina was captured¹⁰¹ following a firefight by Ukrainian border guards on the frontier with Russia while traveling in a truck carrying thousands of dollars in cash and small arms.¹⁰² She was eventually released in exchange for 17 Ukrainian captives, although journalist Yury Butusov reported that some members of the Ukrainian security services had been unhappy with the decision, believing she was a significant figure in the GRU.¹⁰³

101 “In Exchange for a Group of Prisoners, Ukraine Extradited Olga Kulygina, a Personal Friend of Girkin and a Participant in FSB Operations in Transnistria, Georgia,” *Censor.Net*, September 24, 2014 (in Russian). URL: <https://censor.net/ru/news/303988/v-obmen-na-gruppu-plennykh-ukraina-vydala-olgu-kulyginu-lichnogo-druga-girkin-a-i-uchastnitsu-operatsiyi>

102 “The Media Confirmed That Ukraine Exchanged Kulygina - an FSB Agent and a ‘Good Friend’ of Girkin,” *Ukrainian Independent Information Agency (Unian)*, September 24, 2014 (in Russian). URL: <https://www.unian.net/politics/988523-v-smi-podtverdili-cho-ukraina-obmenyala-kulyginu-agenta-fsb-i-horoshuyu-znakomuyu-girkinu.html>

103 Anna Nemtsova, “A Torture Survivor on Ukraine’s Tortured Ceasefire,” *The Daily Beast*, April 14, 2017. URL: <https://www.thedailybeast.com/a-torture-survivor-on-ukraines-tortured-ceasefire>; Yury Butusov, Facebook, September 24, 2014 (in Russian). URL: <https://www.facebook.com/butusov.yuriy/posts/841106475929650>

Foremost among the Ukrainian intelligence officer familiar with her story is Valery Kondratyuk, who in 2014 was the director of Ukraine's military intelligence service, HUR. In an interview with one of the authors, Kondratyuk stated that following Kulygina's arrest, the Ukrainians had intercepted phone calls between Girkin and Igor Bezler, another Russian paramilitary commander (and GRU officer) who had established himself in the town of Horlivka, just under 25 miles southeast of Sloviansk.¹⁰⁴ The Russians were determined to free Kulygina and were planning an armed attack on the convoy, forcing her captors to change route. Bezler then conducted mock executions of Ukrainian hostages he had captured and threatened more killings and even a terrorist attack to poison water in Kyiv.¹⁰⁵

At the same time, Kondratyuk said, Russian lobbyists within Ukraine (including those allegedly attached to the SBU) made entreaties for Kulygina's release, while Ukrainian POWs were granted phone calls with their families to pass on the message that their freedom would cost just one Russian woman's exchange.

Kondratyuk is convinced that Kulygina was a high-ranking member of the GRU, especially in light of the effort made by the enemy to free her and the fact that she remained steadfast in captivity without ever disclosing any information other than her name. "Unfortunately, we didn't have enough time to finish what we started because Poroshenko was in an unstable position," Kondratyuk said, referring to Ukrainian president, Petro Poroshenko. "He was under pressure and because of the meetings that were taking place under the administration, he decided to exchange her."

Borodai's stint in charge of Donetsk would not last long. Having helped bring a semblance of order to the newly proclaimed state in mid-May, he went home to Moscow after just over two months in the job, leaving the reigns to the newly announced¹⁰⁶ "deputy prime minister," the former Transnistrian KGB chief Antyufeyev. Borodai would return to Donetsk for a few days in August, only to announce that he was stepping down to make way for a native local, paramilitary commander Aleksandr Zakharchenko.¹⁰⁷ Zakharchenko held the position of "prime minister" for just over four years, until he was assassinated in a cafe bombing on August 31, 2018.¹⁰⁸

Girkin's own rule in Sloviansk came to an embarrassing end in early July 2014, when he was forced to flee the city as Ukrainian troops retook it.¹⁰⁹ However, he remained in formal control of the Russia-backed fighters in the Donetsk region as the DNR's defense minister and was demonstrably coordinating their activities, including air defense assets when Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 was shot down. In November 2022, he was determined to be criminally responsible and found guilty in

104 "How Russia Issues Fake Passports to Its Operatives in Ukraine," *Bellingcat*, November 7, 2019. URL: <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2019/11/07/how-russia-issues-fake-passports-to-its-operatives-in-ukraine/>

105 Is This Video of Separatists Executing Two Ukrainian Army Officers Staged?," *The Observers - France 24*, June 6, 2014. URL: <https://observers.france24.com/en/20140606-video-ukrainian-officers-being-executed-separatists-staged>

106 "Russian Ex-Police Chief Antyufeyev Leads Donetsk Rebels," *BBC*, July 31, 2014. URL: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-28546157>

107 "Borodai Announced That He Was Leaving the Post of Prime Minister of the DPR," *Ria Novosti*, August 7, 2014. URL: <https://ria.ru/20140807/1019193894.html>

108 "Ukraine Conflict: Blast Kills Top Donetsk Rebel Zakharchenko," *BBC*, August 31, 2018. URL: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-45371270>

109 "Pro-Russia Rebels and Commander Flee Slavyansk," *Agence France Presse (AFP)*, July 5, 2014. URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20140715012752/http://news.yahoo.com/pro-russia-rebels-commander-flee-slavyansk-070725780.html>

absentia for the murder of the plane's 298 passengers and crew by a Dutch court.¹¹⁰

With his old friend and comrade Borodai out of the picture in August 2014, Girkin soon departed Ukraine, forced out, he claims, by the Kremlin.¹¹¹

The siege of Sloviansk had actually begun after a brief truce collapsed over the Easter weekend, following the first combat fatalities in the area on April 20.¹¹² Russian media had claimed that several separatist paramilitaries had been killed in a surprise attack by Ukrainian nationalists from the Right Sector movement during the night.¹¹³ Their bodies, as well as paraphernalia bearing the symbols of the group were displayed to journalists by the Russia-backed paramilitaries.¹¹⁴

While there were allegations that the collection of evidence that Russian state media presented as proof of the Right Sector's role in the attack was faked or manipulated, the group's leader, Dmytro Yarosh, told Ukrainian outlet Censor.net in 2016 that he and his fighters had indeed been involved in the incident.¹¹⁵

Yarosh claimed that he was acting on the orders of Oleksandr Turchynov, the acting president of Ukraine following Yanukovich's ouster, to disable a television broadcasting tower on Karachun Hill overlooking Sloviansk. On their way to the station, which Russian-backed fighters seized several days earlier, Yarosh and his group encountered a roadblock guarded by paramilitaries. Both sides claim the other shot first. Yarosh said that his poorly armed fighters had had to withdraw, killing six Russian or insurgent fighters but losing one of their own, with another, Yaroslav Antonyuk, suffering severe head injuries that left him disabled.

Earlier that day, supporters of the paramilitaries ruling Sloviansk had begun broadcasting their own propaganda videos.¹¹⁶

110 Jennifer Rankin, "Three Men Found Guilty of Murdering 298 People in Shooting down of MH17," *The Guardian*, November 17, 2022. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/nov/17/three-men-found-guilty-of-murdering-298-people-in-flight-mh17-bombing>

111 "Donetsk People's Republic Dismisses Defense Minister," *ITAR-TASS*, August 14, 2014. URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20140816183349/http://en.itar-tass.com/world/745065>; Ilya Yashin and Olga Shorina, "Putin. War Full Text," *TV Rain*, May 12, 2015 (in Russian). URL: https://tvrain.tv/news/opublikovan_doklad_putin_vojna-387180/

112 Luke Harding, "Slavyansk Shootout Threatens to Bury Ukraine Peace Deal," *The Guardian*, April 21, 2014. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/20/ukraine-agreement-falters-shoot-out-slavyansk>

113 "The Truce in Slavyansk Turned out to Be a Lie," *Vesti*, April 20, 2014 (in Russian). URL: <https://www.vesti.ru/article/1822951>

114 "Moscow Accuses the 'Right Sector' of the Death of 'Innocent Citizens' in Slavyansk," *Radio France Internationale (RFI)*, April 20, 2014. (in Russian) URL: <https://www.rfi.fr/ru/ukraine/20140420-moskva-obvinila-pravyi-sektor-v-gibeli-ni-v-chem-nepovinykh-grazhdan-v-slavyanske>; Paul Roderick Gregory, "Putin Propagandists Caught Red-Handed Again: Pro-Russian Self-Defense Forces Capture Snipers' Diapers," *Forbes*, April 20, 2014. URL: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/paulroderickgregory/2014/04/20/putin-propagandists-caught-red-handed-again-pro-russian-self-defense-forces-capture-snipers-diapers/>

115 Yury Butusov, "Dmytro Yarosh: 'The First Offensive Battle Took Place on April 20, 2014 - Volunteers Attacked a Checkpoint near Sloviansk'," *Censor.Net*, April 22, 2014 (in Russian). URL: https://censor.net/ru/resonance/385673/dmitro_yarosh_pershyyi_nastupalniyi_byi_vyini_vdubvsya_20_kvtnya_2014go_dobrovolts_atakuvali_blokpost

116 "The Separatists Seized the TV Air of Sloviansk in Order to Strike at the 'Zionist Zombie,'" *News Russia*, April 21, 2014 (in Russian). URL: https://www.newsru.co.il/world/21apr2014/tv_003_print.html

Chapter 3. The Cult of KOB

Following a video declaration of local self-governance in Sloviansk, a new program began with the instantly recognizable gothic organ stabs of Bach's *Toccatina and Fugue in D Minor* and a spinning globe. This cut to a grainy VHS of a bald man in Russian military uniform, delivering a lecture on the "GENERAL THEORY OF CONTROL."



Konstantin Petrov appears in the video broadcast from the Sloviansk TV Center. Screenshot from YouTube video.

The activists who had taken over Inter TV Studio, which had belonged to the Inter television network, can be heard cheering as the video begins on their own recording of the broadcast.¹¹⁷

117 "Sloviansk delivers an informational blow," Youtube Video, posted by "Anatolich77777", April 22, 2014.
URL: <https://youtu.be/VN79295TM4A>



Vyacheslav Negreba inside the Sloviansk TV Center. Screenshot from YouTube video.

One of the men, embodying a forbidding mix of the “Protocols of the Elders of Zion” and an early David Cronenberg script, harangues the camera:¹¹⁸

Here, from Sloviansk, we will strike a most powerful informational, conceptual blow against the Biblical matrix ... through our television broadcasting against zombie-broadcasting ... Zionist zombie-broadcasting ... the Zionist zombie-box.

The Russian officer in the video is Maj. Gen. Konstantin Petrov, a commander in the Space Forces. This was the first part of a series of video lectures he recorded in the '90s, which lay out the precepts of what is called “Konceptsiya Obshchestvennoy Bezopasnosti” (KOB), the “Concept of Public Security.”¹¹⁹

118 “Ukraine Liveblog Day 63: Moscow and Kiev Point Fingers After Ceasefire Shattered,” The Interpreter , April 21, 2014. URL: <https://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-63-moscow-and-kiev-point-fingers-after-ceasefire-shattered/#2388>

119 “K.P Petrov Lecture Course,” Youtube Video, posted by “TheRat200”, November 11, 2012. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLoUHJgRPSc77ZQoi6CKRl6rOvCi37n8Og>

KOB is a deeply antisemitic conspiracy cult built around the veneration of Stalin and neo-pagan notions of Russian destiny. It rejects the “Judeo-Christian” influence on culture and language and marries management jargon, self-help pseudo-psychology and folklore concepts such as “dead water,” said to be a substance that has the capacity to heal wounds but not resurrect. History, as per KOB, is a conspiracy involving Jews, Freemasons and the Church, working in concert to control the world through “conceptual power” via a secret government or “global predictor,” established by high-ranking priests in ancient Egypt.



Screenshot from one of Petrov’s video lectures on YouTube.

The man speaking to the camera in the studio in Sloviansk, Vyacheslav Negreba, was in fact already listed as an author of antisemitic extremist materials on the Russian Ministry of Justice’s website. An outright racist with a fixation on restoring the USSR and recording terrible music, Negreba is a devoted member of KOB.¹²⁰

¹²⁰ “Vyacheslav Negreba: Home to the USSR,” Youtube Video, posted by “Ivan Sharkov”, Jun 18, 2021. URL: <https://youtu.be/8JWJTXt--gE>

Although Petrov was the face of the cult, the originators were purportedly an anonymous collective called the “Internal Predictor of the U.S.S.R.,” whose public “spokesman” was Vladimir Zaznabin, a scientist and naval officer who had specialized in underwater acoustics and worked with the Soviet submarine program. Vladimir Popov, a former KGB officer who left Russia in 1996 and now resides in Canada, notes that Zaznabin admitted that KOB was first promulgated at the direction of Filipp Bobkov, head of the KGB’s 5th Directorate, which was responsible for suppressing internal dissent in the Soviet Union.¹²¹ Popov evidently had regular meetings with Bobkov until 1997.

Bobkov, who died in 2019, was allegedly the mastermind behind a number of controlled opposition groups including the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, a perfectly ill-named ultranationalist party headed by the late Vladimir Zhirinovskiy.¹²² He also allegedly stoked ethnic conflicts during the dying days of the Soviet Union, such as the Azerbaijani-Armenian war.¹²³ Even diehard adherents of KOB agree that Bobkov had an extensive influence over its formation, including the very same Negreba who had addressed the camera in Sloviansk.¹²⁴

The aim of KOB, as Popov argues, was to indoctrinate politicians, civil servants and officers and ensure the centrality of the role of the security services within the very soul of the state. Lectures were held on the grounds of Parliament on a weekly basis via the State Duma Committee on Geopolitics following an introductory hearing “on the Concept of Public Security” in November 1995.

121 “Notes of a Former KGB Lieutenant Colonel: ‘The Concept of National Security of Russia’ and Its Creators,” *Gordon Ukraine*, May 6, 2020 (in Russian). URL: <https://gordonua.com/publications/zapiski-byvshego-podpolkovnika-kgb-koncepciya-nacionalnoy-bezopasnosti-rossii-i-ee-sozdateli-1497425.html>

122 Aleksandr Yakovlev, *Sumerki* (Materik: Moscow, 2005) p. 561.

123 Vladimir Popov, “Notes of a Former KGB Lieutenant Colonel: Who Was Behind the Preparation of the Special Services to Seize Power in Russia,” *Gordon Ukraine*, September 9, 2020 (in Russian).

URL: <https://gordonua.com/publications/zapiski-byvshego-podpolkovnika-kgb-kto-stoyal-za-podgotovkoy-specsluzhb-k-zahvatu-vlasti-v-rossii-1517059.html>

124 Soviet Stalker, “Elimination of Saboteurs in KOB,” *Kont*, July 6, 2019 (in Russian). URL: <https://cont.ws/@radogar/1379769>

Many KOB adherents insist that Putin is a supporter of their ideas, with one of their key pieces of evidence being a letter he had sent to one of their leaders in 1998, when he was still the director of the FSB.¹²⁵

Unfortunately, being extremely busy right now, I am unable to take a personal meeting with representatives of the group of authors of "Dead water," Petrov K.P. and Ivanov M.N. At the same time, sharing your concern for the perfection of the process of maintaining the security of our country, I agree to consider the given problem at the conceptual level. I have given necessary assignments to the respective structures of the FSB to research the problems of security, in the light of the ideas set out in your attached note.

While this reads more like a bureaucrat's attempt at a polite dismissal more than any enthusiastic endorsement, KOB nevertheless made it back into the good graces of the KGB's domestic successor agency. In the early 2000s, with Putin now President, one of KOB's most high-profile followers was the academic Viktor Yefimov, who gave a series of lectures to regional FSB offices on the Concept, including at Putin's home office in St. Petersburg.¹²⁶

KOB's success as a conspiratorial worldview and justification for the authoritarian security state was not matched by its legacy as a political organization. Petrov, who had so effectively channeled but not come up with any of the ideology, launched his own Conceptual Party — Unity (KPE) in 2000. Having failed to ever win any seats in the Duma in successive elections, the Russian Supreme Court liquidated the party in 2007.

Petrov had become increasingly preoccupied by the neo-pagan aspects, hinting at the original KOB texts and, by the time of his death in 2009, was calling himself the "Sorcerer Meragor" and dressing in white and green robes, paired with a *kolovrat*, a Slavic variation of the swastika.¹²⁷

125 Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan, "Dead Water: How the Russian Security Services' Paranoid Mindset Justifies the War," Stockholm Center for Eastern European Studies, December 20, 2022, URL: <https://sceeus.se/publikationer/dead-water-how-the-russian-security-services-paranoid-mindset-justifies-the-war/>.<https://sceeus.se/publikationer/dead-water-how-the-russian-security-services-paranoid-mindset-justifies-the-war/>

126 "Managing the World FSB Lectures (Efimov)," Youtube Video, posted by "Valery Kudryavtsev", December 25, 2010. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=raFJDUXDTMs>

127 "K. Petrov's last appeal," Youtube Video, posted by "Vladimir Lesknik", July 28, 2009. URL: <https://youtu.be/iwsat2um5uo>



2009 KPE photo of Konstantin Petrov as Meragor.

Petrov's disbanded party, meanwhile, lives on, now known by the same initials KPE, albeit now as the initialism for *Kursom Pravdy i Yedineniya* ("Course of Truth and Unity"). Negreba is a member of this organization.¹²⁸ The cult also has a close relationship with the much better-known *Natsionalno-Osvoboditelnoye Dvizheniye* (NOD), the National Liberation Movement, which harasses the Russian opposition, sometimes violently, and conducts visually dramatic marches and demonstrations.¹²⁹ In 2013, Yevgeny Fyodorov, a minister of Parliament in Putin's United Russia party and the founder of NOD, confirmed that KPE is part of his movement's coordinating committee.¹³⁰

128 OTV Kramatorska, "Political Situation in Slovyansk," Youtube Video, April 20, 2014. URL: <https://youtu.be/z-OaI7HHto>

129 Alexey Polukhin, Tatyana Vasilchuk, and Alisa Kustikova, "Fire, Brilliant Green, Eggs and Feces: How Pro-Government Activists Terrorize and Injure Opponents," *Novaya Gazeta*, May 3, 2017. (in Russian), URL: <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2017/05/02/72348-ogon-zelenka-yaytsa-i-fekalii>; Alex Kokcharov, Twitter, November 12, 2022. URL: <https://twitter.com/AlexKokcharov/status/1591358142457479169>

130 "KOB Putin," Youtube Video, posted by "Artom Voytenkov - Poznavatelnoye TV", December 6, 2013. URL: <https://youtu.be/MteWmBtgExc>

In Ukraine, the diehard, organizational KOB members were noticeable on the margins of several pro-Russian actions, most often in concert with members of the Progressive Socialist Party (PSPU) headed by Natalia Vitrenko, herself a member of Dugin's International Eurasian Union,¹³¹ who had spoken at the same 2006 ESM summer camp as the founders of DNR.¹³² For instance, Vitrenko held a rally against "Eurocolonization" in November 2013 in protest of Kyiv's planned signing of the Association Agreement with the European Union.¹³³ It was Ukrainian President Yanukovich's last-minute abandonment of this agreement in the face of Russian pressure that triggered the first protests on Maidan Nezalezhnosti, which eventually spiraled into the Revolution of Dignity, toppling his government.

At least two of the KOB adherents who later celebrated the broadcast of Petrov's lectures from the Inter TV Studio – Negreba and Andrei Dyachenko – had spoken¹³⁴ at a KOB meeting in the eastern Ukrainian city of Dnipro on February 8, 2014, where they argued that Ukraine was not a legally legitimate state and rightfully belonged to the USSR.

In Luhansk, members of the PSPU and KOB formed the separatist paramilitary organization *Luganskaya Gvardiya* ("Luhansk Guard"), which set up a protest camp in March 2014 and agitated for a referendum on breaking away from Ukraine and joining Russia.¹³⁵

131 "Natalia Vitrenko and Eurasians threaten NATO with popular resistance in Crimea: press conference results," International Eurasian Movement, June 7, 2006 (in Russian). URL: <http://med.org.ru/news/42>

132 "ESM Summer Camp - August 2006," Rossiya-3, date unknown (archived on August 19, 2007), (in Russian). URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20070819230107/http://rossia3.ru/foto4>

133 "Kyiv against Eurocolonization," Progressive Socialist Party (PSPU) Website, October 21, 2013 (in Russian). URL: https://web.archive.org/web/20140329090832/http://vitrenko.org/start.php?lang=1&article_id=17589

134 "Sergei Danilov in Dnipropetrovsk", YouTube video posted by Radovlad3, February 12, 2014 (in Russian). URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F4H2ksKnyKI>

135 Aleksandr Bakhmutsky, "Russian Spring. Luhansk Guard. How it all Began," Ridero. URL: <https://ridero.ru/books/russkaya-vesna-luganskaya-gvardiya-kak-vse-nachinalos/freeText/>; "Luganskaya Gvardiya - How it was!", RuTube video, posted by Aleksandr Bakhmutsky, December 16, 2015. URL: <https://rutube.ru/video/6b23cab5872029e596ee5696cb7291e3/>; "Luhansk Guard" closed its tent (Photo)," *O641.ua*, March 21, 2014 (in Ukrainian). URL: <https://www.0642.ua/news/499358/luganskaa-gvardia-svernula-palatku-foto>; "Lugansk guard" announced their demands (list)," *Cxid.info*, April 15, 2014 (in Russian). URL: <https://cxid.info/113698-luganskaya-gvardiya-oglasila-svoi-trebovaniya-spisok.html>



Negreba (right) watches as a car fitted with loudhailers begins announcing the imposition of martial law in Sloviansk on April 21, 2014. Screenshot from YouTube video.

In Sloviansk, Negreba was visible on the street when a car set off to announce the imposition of martial law on the morning of April 21, after the skirmish near the TV station.¹³⁶ That same day, Dyachenko was named by Russian media as a “member of the organizing committee on issues of the Territorial Commune” for the city.¹³⁷

It was the seizure of municipal power by this Territorial Commune, the insurgents’ answer to a pop-up self-government, which was announced in the video clip broadcast from the TV studio just before Petrov’s lecture began.¹³⁸

136 “Slavyansk. On April 21, 2014, a curfew was announced in the city,” YouTube Video, posted by “OTV Kramatorska”, April 23, 2014. URL: <https://youtu.be/w1NYY6dQdwM>

137 Anton Frolov, “Sloviansk: We’ve got sticks, while they’re coming at us with tanks”, Pravda.ru, May 2, 2014 (in Russian). URL: <https://www.pravda.ru/world/1206416-slavyansk/>

138 “Announcement about the general meeting of Slavyansk.”, YouTube video, posted by “OTV Kramatorska”, April 20, 2014. URL: <https://youtu.be/wRNCqjtRGNQ>



Screenshot from the video announcement of self-governance in Sloviansk.

Oleksandr Tikhonenko, another member of KPE identified in the video, had tried to organize a similar Territorial Commune in nearby Kramatorsk earlier that year, just after the takeover of Crimea.¹³⁹

Organizations with similar overtones continued to spring up near Sloviansk even after the Ukrainian government restored control. Tikhonenko was involved in several such efforts after his initial failed one in Kramatorsk,¹⁴⁰ and in 2018, another commune was declared by Hennadiy Turkin, a man with his own cult based around pyramids.¹⁴¹

Turkin and his comrades were accused by local media and political activists of working on behalf

139 "Interview with O. Tikhonov with KPE TV," Youtube Video, posted by "OTV Kramatorska", August 21, 2015. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DTiW-nVhzZ4>; Mikhail Korolev, "Protests against Medvedchuk In Slovyansk," *Sloviansk Site*, April 30, 2018 (in Ukrainian). URL: <https://www.6262.com.ua/news/2026679/v-slavanske-protestovali-protiv-medvedchuka>

140 Oleksii Ladika, "Kramatorsk Resident Oleksandr Tikhonenko Announced That He Is Running for the Verkhovna Rada," *Kramatorsk Post*, June 3, 2019 (in Russian). URL: <https://www.kramatorskpost.com/tikhonenko-obyavil-chno-ballotiruetsya-v-verhovnyu-radu/>

141 Mikhail Korolev, "Protests against Medvedchuk In Slovyansk," *Sloviansk Site*, April 30, 2018 (in Ukrainian). URL: <https://www.6262.com.ua/news/2026679/v-slavanske-protestovali-protiv-medvedchuka>; Hennadiy Turkin @solotora, Youtube Profile. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/@solotora>

of the Kremlin-aligned oligarch Viktor Medvedchuk, a leader in the parliamentary opposition at that time and media magnate. (Confirming the decadeslong assessment that he was a Russian agent, Putin, who is godfather to Medvedchuk's daughter Darya, traded 215 Ukrainian prisoners of war, including some of their most high-profile hostages such as Britons Aiden Aslin and Shaun Pinner, for the oligarch and 54 other captives.)¹⁴²

KOB existed alongside other outre religious movements with suspicious links to the Russian state. One was the Social-Patriotic Assembly of the Slavs (SPAS), a mysticist-communist microparty from Kherson led by Eduard Kovalenko, an agent-provocateur who had posed as a neo-Nazi in 2004, allegedly backing the liberal Ukrainian presidential candidate Yushchenko.¹⁴³ Kovalenko later reemerged as a pro-Russian activist collaborating with AllatRa, a New Age cult with apparently enormous resources, funding TV stations and billboard advertising. AllatRa hosted Kovalenko on their TV channel and promoted Yefimov's writings on KOB in their recommended literature.¹⁴⁴

142 Oliver Caroll, "The Return of the Godfather: How Putin's Best Friend in Ukraine Is Staging an Improbable Comeback," *The Independent*, August 31, 2018. URL: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/putin-russia-godfather-viktor-medvedchuk-us-sanctions-ukraine-politics-a8515456.html> Shaun Walker, "Russia Trades Azov Fighters for Putin Ally in Biggest Prisoner Swap of Ukraine War," *The Guardian*, September 22, 2022. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/22/ukrainian-putin-ally-viktor-medvedchuk-exchanged-for-200-azov-battalion-fighters-zelenskiy-says>

143 "What is the Symbol and Flag of the Spas Party," Youtube Video, posted by "Eduard Kovalenko", December 29, 2020. URL: https://youtu.be/_NcYMATscX8; Anton Shekhovtsov, "Pro-Russian Network behind the Anti-Ukrainian Defamation Campaign," *Anton-Shekhovtsov.Blogspot*. (blog), February 3, 2014. URL: <https://anton-shekhovtsov.blogspot.com/2014/02/pro-russian-network-behind-anti.html>

144 "How to get started already? Eduard Kovalenko about the Creative Society," Youtube Video, posted by "Sozidatelnoye Obshchestvo TV Dnepr", April 20, 2014. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3-geJM1bv38&channel=%D0%A1%D0%BE%D0%B7%D0%B8%D0%B4%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B5%D0%BB%D1%8C%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%B5%D0%9E%D0%B1%D1%89%D0%B5%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B2%D0%BE%D0%A2%D0%92%D0%94%D0%BD%D0%B5%D0%BF%D1%80>; Efimov Viktor Alekseevich, "Concepts of public safety (PSC)," Allatra Biblioteka (in Russian). URL: <https://allatra.club/post/koncepcii-obschestvennoj-bezopasnosti.html>

Chapter 4. Nazi Guns-for-Hire: The Rise of Rusich and the Russian Imperial Movement

Alongside revanchist Russian nationalists and esoteric cultists, the war for Donbas also brought unvarnished neo-Nazis to Ukraine.

A group calling itself Sabotage-Assault and Reconnaissance Group “Rusich” would go on to commit some of the most infamous atrocities in eastern Ukraine.

Rusich first gained attention following the publication of a video filmed in the aftermath of an ambush on a Ukrainian convoy near the Luhansk village of Metallist in September 2014. The footage shows members of the unit in combat interrogating an injured Ukrainian service member.¹⁴⁵ His captors had carved a *kolovrat* onto his cheek. Five days after the ambush, Graham Phillips, a now-sanctioned, British, pro-Russian propagandist, filmed an “interview” with the service member, who was unrecognizably burned from head to toe. Evidently, Rusich had doused him with fuel and set him alight after taking him prisoner.

Speaking in 2019 to the Belarusian independent TV channel Belsat, the victim’s parents confirmed that the man in both videos was their son, Ivan Issyk.¹⁴⁶ According to the Belsat documentary, armed men abducted Issyk from a hospital in occupied Luhansk several days after the “interview” with Phillips. They killed him. Issyk’s body was returned to his family the following month. His father reported that Issyk’s internal organs had been cut out and replaced in his body, and blue and yellow fabric had been stuffed into his mouth.

Rusich is led by a baby-faced former Russian paratrooper named Aleksei Milchakov, who had several years earlier gained notoriety online for posting photos of himself decapitating a puppy with a knife.¹⁴⁷ An undated photo of a teenage Milchakov shows him standing with a shotgun in front of the flag of Russian National Unity, the neo-Nazi party founded by Dugin’s old Pamyat rival, Barkashov.

145 Yan Yatsk, “The defeat of the Aidar. September,” Youtube Video, September 17, 2014. URL: <https://youtu.be/C9fpXeZNT4Y>

146 “Descendants of the Poles Die for Ukraine: Ivan Isyk - Torture and Death in Captivity,” Belsat TV, February 15, 2015 (in Russian). URL: <https://naviny.belsat.eu/ru/news/potomki-polyakov-umirayut-za-ukrainu-ivan-isyk-pytki-i-smert-v-plenu/>

147 “Prosecutor’s office takes on Zenit fan who cut off the head of a dog”, Vesti, November 28, 2011 (in Russian). URL: <https://www.vesti.ru/article/2100961>

Milchakov has not shied away from these political associations, proudly stating in a 2020 interview:¹⁴⁸

I am a Nazi. I won't go deep and say nationalist, or patriot, imperialist and so on. I can raise my hand. When you kill a person, you feel the thrill of a hunter. He who hasn't been hunting should give it a try.



*Yan Petrovsky (left) and Aleksei Milchakov (third from left) of Rusich in 2015.*¹⁴⁹

148 Kyrylo Tkachenko, "How parts of the German Left support fascists in Ukraine, Part 3: Comrade Mozgovoy and his 'communist' Ghost", Indymedia Linksunten, January 10, 2016 (in German). URL: <https://linksunten.indymedia.org/node/164639/index.html>; Dmitry Kozhurin, "'I'm a Nazi. I Can Raise My Hand.' In Ukraine, Dozens of Fighters of Russian Neo-Nazi Groups Are Fighting on the Side of the Russian Federation," *Nastoyashcheye Vremya*, May 26, 2022 (in Russian). URL: <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/ya-natsist-mogu-ruku-vskinut-v-ukraine-na-storone-rf-voyuyut-desyatki-boytsov-rossiyskih-neonatsistskih-gruppirovok-/31868399.html>

149 "Fighter Milchakov Announced the Withdrawal of the Rusich Detachment from the Donbass," *Ukrainian Independent Information Agency (UNIAN)*, October 7, 2015 (in Russian). URL: <https://www.unian.net/war/1099282-boevik-jivoder-milchakov-soobschil-ob-otvode-otryada-rusich-s-donbassa.html>

Alongside the obviously psychopathic Milchakov, the other best-known member of Rusich is a sometime-Norwegian resident named Yan Petrovsky, who goes by the pompous pseudonym of *Velikiy Slavyanin* (“the Great Slav”). Petrovsky was also a member of a Norwegian neo-Nazi group called Soldiers of Odin, which conducted patrols on the streets of Tønsberg, outside Oslo, to intimidate Muslims and immigrants.¹⁵⁰

That cosplay Norse aspect features heavily in Rusich’s propaganda. The group frequently posts messages in Icelandic despite no members hailing from the island nation, and in 2015 it was photographed conducting rituals with Hitler salutes and offerings before a fire.¹⁵¹



Members of Rusich take part in neo-pagan ceremony with Hitler salutes. Photo originally taken by separatist blogger Gennadiy Dubovoy in 2015.

At around the same time these photos were taken, Rusich was based at an agricultural school near the southern Donetsk town of Razdolne.¹⁵² They were joined here for a while by foreign fighters,

150 “‘Patriot’ Group Soldiers of Odin Debut in Norway,” *The Local Norway*, February 15, 2016. URL: <https://www.thelocal.no/20160215/patriot-group-soldiers-of-odin-debut-in-norway>

151 “Nazis are the core of Russia’s Hybrid Army in Ukraine,” *Ukraineatwar.blogpost*. (blog), June 9, 2016. URL: <https://ukraineatwar.blogspot.com/2015/06/nazis-are-core-of-russias-hybrid-army.html>

152 “Meet The Russian Fighters Building A Base Between Mariupol And Donetsk,” *The Interpreter*, June 17, 2015.

including an unidentified person with an Italian flag on his uniform and Brazilian Rafael Lusvarghi. Lusvarghi, a veteran of the French Foreign Legion and a self-declared Duginist, had traveled to Donetsk in 2014 to fight on the Russian side, joining together with a small group of fellow neo-Nazis from Brazil, France and other countries.¹⁵³ The group called itself Team Vikernes in honor of Varg Vikernes, a neo-Nazi musician from Norway who records under the name Burzum and was jailed for the murder of one of his bandmates.¹⁵⁴



Milchakov (left) with an unidentified man wearing Italian flag patch. Photo posted on VK.com on March 30, 2015.¹⁵⁵

URL: <https://www.interpretermag.com/meet-the-russian-fighters-building-a-base-between-mariupol-and-donetsk/>

153 "Razdolnoe (Donetsk Region). Neo-Nazis, Foreigners, and a Cluster of Military Equipment," *InformNapalm*, May 31, 2015 (in Russian), URL: <https://informnapalm.org/9504-razdolnoe-donetskaya-oblast-neonatsysty-ynostrantsy-y-skoplenye-voennoj-tehnyky/>; DshRG "Rusich" "Reports from the militia of Novorossiya.," VKontakte, 30 May 2015 (in Russian), URL: <https://archive.is/cAQiD>; "Rafael Lusvarghi: The Viking of Donbas," *Ared Rover*, April 1, 2015. URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20160110090328/http://aredrover.com/rafael-lusvarghi-the-viking-of-donbas/>

154 Kat Argo, "Team Vikernes – What's in a name?" *Ared Rover*, May 3, 2015. URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20150525102807/http://aredrover.com/europe/ukraine/donetsk/team-vikernes-whats-in-a-name/>

155 DshRG "Rusich" "Reports from the militia of Novorossiya.," VKontakte, 30 May 2015. (in Russian), URL: <https://archive.is/cAQiD>

When Rusich first appeared in Donbas as a paramilitary organization, it was operating as part of Rapid Reaction Group (GBR) “Batman,” named for the callsign of pro-Russian commander Aleksandr Bednov. The circumstances surrounding Bednov’s death would come to play a part in the origin story of one of the most recognizable Russian mercenary forces on the planet.

On Jan. 2, 2015, Bednov was driving down the highway in a convoy with members of GBR Batman when he was ambushed in the Russian-controlled south of the Luhansk region.¹⁵⁶ Bednov’s assassins used machine guns, grenade launchers and even thermobaric missiles supported by two infantry fighting vehicles to ensure his death, along with all of his escorts, his unit claimed.¹⁵⁷

The “Prosecutor General’s Office” of the “People’s Republic of Luhansk” (LNR) issued a statement claiming that Bednov had been killed while resisting arrest.¹⁵⁸ The LNR had accused the Batman commander, along with over a dozen other members of his unit, of illegally detaining and torturing civilians. Surviving members of GBR Batman alleged Bednov’s assassination was carried out by a private military company named or perhaps headed by someone calling themselves “Wagner.”¹⁵⁹

This was the first ever public mention of the Wagner Group. The private military company that would become infamous on a global scale in the following years had its origins in an abortive mercenary mission to Syria in 2013 under the name Slavonic Corps.¹⁶⁰ Wagner would enter combat proper within weeks of Bednov’s assassination, joining the Russian army in the assault on Debaltseve. Under the patronage of an ex-con turned caterer, Yevgeny Prigozhin, Wagner have established both permanent bases and lucrative natural resource extraction operations in Syria, Libya, Sudan, the Central African Republic and Mali, as well as Ukraine, where tens of thousands of their troops, many of them now recruited from prisons, have died in the meat grinder of Bakhmut.¹⁶¹ Wagner’s reputation for cruelty and violence has been carefully cultivated since that very first appearance in 2015, and the group revels in horror as videos show prisoners murdered with sledgehammers and decapitated with shovels.¹⁶²

Despite Wagner’s alleged role in their former commander’s murder, Milchakov, Petrovsky and others would later reappear abroad, fighting alongside the notorious mercenary group.

156 Andrey Guselnikov, “Poor Batman,” *Ura Ru*, January 3, 2015 (in Russian). URL: <https://ura.news/articles/1036263795>

157 GBR “Batman” LPR, VKontakte, January 2, 2015 (in Russian), URL: https://vk.com/wall-73367195_866

158 “In the LPR, Reports of Torture of Civilians by Militias,” Lenta.Ru, January 2, 2015 (in Russian). URL: <https://lenta.ru/news/2015/01/02/lugansk/>

159 Colonel Cassad, “The situation with “Batman” - Intermediate results,” Live Journal, January 3, 2015 (in Russian). URL: <https://colonelcassad.livejournal.com/1972757.html>

160 Michael Weiss, “The Case of the Keystone Cossacks,” *Foreign Policy*, November 21, 2013. URL: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/11/21/the-case-of-the-keystone-cossacks/>

161 Michael Weiss and Pierre Vaux, “The Company You Keep: Yevgeny Prigozhin’s Influence Operations in Africa,” Free Russia Foundation, 2020. URL: <https://www.4freerussia.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2020/09/The-Company-You-Keep-Yevgeny-Prigozhins-Influence-Operations-in-Africa.pdf>; Ann M. Simmons and Isabel Coles, “Wagner Says 20,000 of Its Troops Have Died Taking Ukraine’s Bakhmut,” *The Wall Street Journal*, May 24, 2023. URL: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/wagner-says-20-000-of-its-troops-have-died-taking-ukraines-bakhmut-f6d6ee11>

162 Guy Faulconbridge, “Video Shows Sledgehammer Execution of Russian Mercenary,” *Reuters*, November 13, 2022. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/sledgehammer-execution-russian-mercenary-who-defected-ukraine-shown-video-2022-11-13/>;

Candace Rondeaux, “Inquiry into the Murder of Hamdi Bouta and Wagner Group Operations at the Al-Shaer Gas Plant, Homs, Syria 2017,” *New America*, June 8, 2020. URL: <https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/reports/inquiry-murder-hamdi-bouta/investigation-redux-new-videos-appear-and-with-them-a-new-mystery/>

Another fascist paramilitary group that followed a similar path from the battlefields of Donbas to adventuring with Wagner abroad was *Russkoye Imperskoye Dvizheniye* (RID), the Russian Imperial Legion.

RID received some attention in early 2020 when the U.S. State Department designated them as a global terrorist organization.¹⁶³ Much of the reporting at that time focused on their extensive network of connections with Western neo-Nazi groups, particularly the Nordic Resistance Movement in Scandinavia and the Traditionalist Workers' Party in the U.S.A.

RID was founded by Stanislav Vorobyev, a St. Petersburg native who had previously served as secretary of his local branch of the nationalist Derzhava party, itself founded by Russia's former vice president, Aleksandr Ruskoy, who had led the parliamentary faction in 1993.¹⁶⁴

Like other characters discussed in this report who opposed the government that year and remain — at least publicly — fiercely critical of the Putin regime, RID's relationship with the state belies their rhetoric.

In 2008, RID formed a paramilitary wing, the Imperial Legion, headed by Denis Gariev, who also runs their infamous Partizan Center training facility in St. Petersburg. Videos on the VKontakte page for the center show cadets undergoing both hand-to-hand and armed combat training.¹⁶⁵

163 "United States Designates Russian Imperial Movement and Leaders as Global Terrorists," *State.Gov*, April 7, 2020, US Department of State. URL: <https://www.state.gov/united-states-designates-russian-imperial-movement-and-leaders-as-global-terrorists/>

164 "National-International: Incredible Adventures of Russian Imperials in Europe," *News.Ru*, April 13, 2020 (in Russian). URL: <https://news.rambler.ru/other/44008977-natsional-internatsional-neveroyatnye-priklucheniya-russkih-impertsev-v-evrope/>

165 Centr "Partizan", VKontakte Profile. URL: https://vk.com/partizan_kurs



Screenshots from *Partizan Center training video*.

The Center is nominally run by Gariev's registered militia called *Reserv Druzhina* ("Reserve Militia"). A *druzhina* is a state-approved militia force that may operate in support of the police. *Druzhinniki* (militiamen) of the People's Volunteer Druzhina were a common sight in the Soviet era, and Putin revitalized the practice in recent years. Despite the fact that RID is an officially designated extremist organization, Reserve Militia was, until media attention caused it sufficient embarrassment, listed as a legal partner of the St. Petersburg city administration, with the insignia of the Imperial Legion blithely displayed alongside it.¹⁶⁶

Gariev's Partizan Center has not confined itself to graduating Russian combatants. In August 2016, it hosted Anton Thulin and Viktor Melin, two Swedish members of the Nordic Resistance Movement.

166 "Scandinavian Footprint of the Imperial Legion," *Fontanka Russia*, June 15, 2017 (in Russian).
URL: <https://www.fontanka.ru/2017/06/14/138/>



From left: Anton Thulin and Viktor Melin taking part in the Partizan course. Photo from RadikalPortal.no¹⁶⁷

For several months, between November 2016 and January 2017, Thulin and Melin, along with Jimmy Jonasson, another Nordic Resistance member, planted three bombs in or near Gothenburg, the second-largest city in Sweden.¹⁶⁸ One targeted a café and bookstore frequented by left-wing activists; another, a campground housing migrants; and another, a refugee center. That last bomb, which exploded on Jan. 5, seriously injured a member of staff. Gothenburg prosecutor Mats Ljungqvist has claimed Melin and Thulin learned how to construct explosive devices during their Partizan training course in Russia.¹⁶⁹

The Partizan Center has also hosted trainees from two German neo-Nazi groups: *Die Dritte Weg* ("The Third Way") and *Junge Nationalisten*, which is the youth wing of the National Democratic Party (NPD).¹⁷⁰

RID was swift to intervene in Ukraine, dispatching a delegation headed by Vorobyev to Kyiv in February 2014, months after the outbreak of the Revolution of Dignity. There they met with representatives from the Ukrainian far-right Svoboda party, which openly backed the protests and opposed the now-fallen Yanukovich government. Unsurprisingly, talks with their ideological cousins proved unsuccessful. Writing a year later, Vorobyev declared that the failure of those negotiations had made clear to him "the inevitability of war and the need to physically eliminate the cancerous tumor of Ukrainianess."¹⁷¹

167 "Nazi bombers were at a training camp in Russia and were visited by Russian paramilitaries in Sweden", Radikal Portal, September 12, 2017 (in Norwegian). URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20200927063400/https://radikalportal.no/2017/09/12/bombenazister-var-pa-treningsleir-i-russland-og-fikk-besok-av-paramilitaere-russere-i-sverige/>

168 "Swedish Neo-Nazis Held over Gothenburg Refugee Centre Blast," *The Local Sweden*, February 3, 2017. URL: <https://www.thelocal.se/20170203/swedish-neo-nazis-held-over-gothenburg-refugee-centre-blast>

169 "The Nazis Train for War in Russia before Bombings," *Expressen*, June 9, 2017. URL: <https://www.expressen.se/gt/militarutbildades-i-ryssland-precis-fore-bombdaden/>

170 Josef Hufelschulte, "Putin's Support: Russian Extremists Train German Neo-Nazis in a Secret Camp," *Focus*, June 6, 2020. URL: https://www.focus.de/politik/ausland/putins-schuetzenhilfe-fuer-deutsche-neonazis_id_12067725.html

171 "Russian Imperial Movement in 2014," *Newspaper "Right View" - Russian Imperial Legion*, January 15, 2015 (in Russian). URL:



Stanislav Vorobyev in Kyiv, 2014. Photo: rusimperia-inf.ru

At the end of that month, Vorobyev traveled to Simferopol, in what was still unoccupied Crimea, with another delegation that included Imperial Legion commander Gariev.¹⁷²



Russian Imperial Movement at Simferopol Airport, Crimea. Photo: rusimperia-inf.ru

<https://web.archive.org/web/20170613014050/http://rusimperia-inf.ru/catalog/4589.html>

172 "Stanislav Vorobyev about the visit to the State of Simferopol and the situation in Crimea," Youtube Video, posted by "Aleksandr Stroganov", March 4, 2014. URL: <https://youtu.be/MP3EWmlCZ8I>

According to Vorobyev, the purpose of this visit was to organize paramilitary groups in Crimea on the eve of the takeover of major infrastructure by Russian troops and intelligence operatives.¹⁷³

As with Borodai and Girkin, RID next moved to Donbas. On March 14, it sent a delegation to Donetsk and Luhansk, where members met with the Luhansk Guard, consisting of KOB cultists and the Duginists of Ukraine's Progressive Socialist Party, as well as other separatist groupuscules.¹⁷⁴

As of January 2015, the Imperial Legion had, by Vorobyev's own estimation, trained and dispatched over a hundred militants to the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine.¹⁷⁵

By February 2015, RID fighters were engaged in heavy combat in the crucial battle for Debaltseve, in Donetsk, the last major military clash before the tenuous ceasefire of the Minsk Accords was introduced, which ended with a Russian victory. RID suffered extensive casualties, including three dead.¹⁷⁶ At least two of the "very many" legionnaires injured in this campaign were wounded as a result of friendly fire from Russian artillery. By the time RID ended its campaign in Ukraine in September 2015, 11 of its fighters had been killed.¹⁷⁷



Imperial Legion fighters near Debaltseve in 2015. From VKontakte.

173 "Militia Training Base Coordinator: None of Our Fighters Have Seen a Single Representative of the International Brigades," ZAKS Russia, January 30, 2015. URL: <https://www.zaks.ru/new/archive/view/135459>

174 "RID at the Russian Spring in Donbass," Newspaper "Right View" - Russkoye Imperskoye Dvizheniye, January 15, 2015 (in Russian). URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20140323005515/http://www.rusimperia.info/news/id19227.html>

175 "New soldiers of the Russian Empire in Ukraine: film by BBC," YouTube Video, posted by "BBC Russia Service", January 27, 2015. URL: <https://youtu.be/p4gr6yNVFO8>

176 Imperskiy Legion, VKontakte, January 25, 2020 (in Russian). URL: https://vk.com/wall-10533171_3486

177 Denis Vasilyev, VKontakte, May 9, 2022 (in Russian). URL: https://vk.com/wall214942881_1205

The Battle of Debaltseve also saw the first real use of Wagner as a fighting force.¹⁷⁸ One survivor of a Wagner assault near the city claimed¹⁷⁹ that they were ordered to carry out human wave attacks:

Apart from the lack of bayonets for the AKs, it was just like the Second World War. That's how it was outside Debaltseve — they kicked people out of the vehicles onto the field. The command was: Your task is to take a fortification, take a blockpost. And forward, just like meat. When they opened up on us with the hundred-and-twenties, with the Kord [heavy machine guns], with RPGs on the vehicles, on people ... it just vomited.

Wagner's bloody opening act did not put off the Imperial Legion. The political technology wing of Prigozhin's sprawling organization was trying to curry favor with several rival political camps in Libya.¹⁸⁰ Having held off on genuine military support for the faction that Russia was publicly most associated with — Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA), Wagner was finally committed to supporting his assault on Tripoli in late 2019.

Russian Imperial Legion fighters joined them in the operation, losing at least two members in battle.¹⁸¹ Alongside Wagner's usual trail of war crimes, including the execution of civilian captives, Russian neo-Nazi graffiti was found in areas recaptured by forces allied to the U.N.-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) after the LNA's offensive failure.¹⁸²

178 "MinskMonitor: Wagner's Role in Key Ukrainian Battle Revealed," Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab), July 12, 2018.

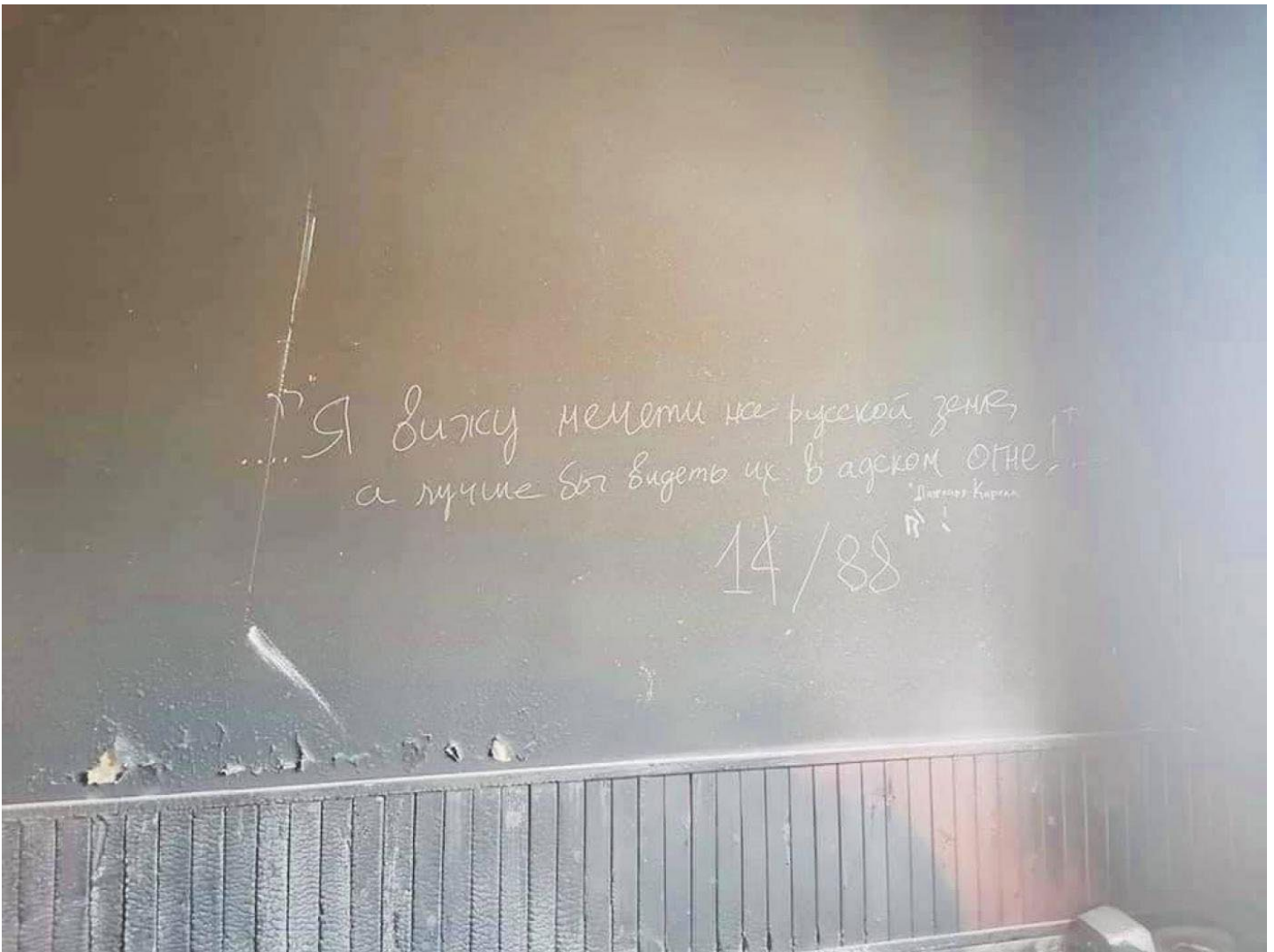
URL: <https://medium.com/dfrlab/minskmonitor-wagners-role-in-key-ukrainian-battle-revealed-95ee8ce133fe>

179 Denis Korotkov, "They Fought For Palmyra", *Fontanka*, March 28, 2016 (in Russian). URL: <https://www.fontanka.ru/2016/03/28/171/>

180 Michael Weiss and Pierre Vaux, "The Company You Keep: Yevgeny Prigozhin's Influence Operations in Africa," Free Russia Foundation, 2020. URL: <https://www.4freerussia.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2020/09/The-Company-You-Keep-Yevgeny-Prigozhins-Influence-Operations-in-Africa.pdf>

181 Imperskiy Legion, Vkontakte, January 27, 2020 (in Russian). URL: https://vk.com/wall-10533171_3488

182 Daniel Hilton, "Russian Mercenaries in Libya: 'They Sprayed Us with Bullets,'" *Middle East Eye*, October 20, 2020. URL: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/big-story/libya-russia-wagner-mercenaries-sprayed-bullets>



"I see mosques on Russian soil, but I'd rather see them in hellfire! 14/88". Photo: MiddleEastEye

The "14/88" below the message refers to the white supremacist slogan, "We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children," coined by the late American neo-Nazi David Lane. It's also known in the movement as the "fourteen words" and two uses of the eighth letter of the alphabet, "H," as in "Heil Hitler."

While Russian fascists likely enjoyed the opportunity to kill Muslims and foreigners, their presence in Libya has little relevance to the Imperial Legion's revanchist *raison d'être*. Girkin pointed this was out when he commented on the announcement of the deaths on VKontakte, saying that they had "no honor, no glory, no valor ... only sorrow."¹⁸³

Milchakov and his fellow neo-Nazis from Rusich, apparently unmoved by Wagner's alleged role in the murder of their old commander Bednov, also reappeared on Prigozhin's missions abroad, this

183 Imperskiy Legion, VKontakte, January 27, 2020 (in Russian). URL: https://vk.com/wall-10533171_3488?reply=3506

time in Syria. In 2017, Milchakov was identified in photos from a gas refinery near Palmyra.¹⁸⁴ Several other Rusich members would also be identified in Syria, including Petrovsky.¹⁸⁵



Photo of Milchakov (front) and other mercenaries at the Hayan Petroleum Company's Jihar Gas Plant. Photo via Fontanka.ru.

Denis Korotkov, a journalist with the independent St. Petersburg news outlet Fontanka who had been the first to cover the Russian mercenary operations that became Wagner, reported that Milchakov's name was indeed on a list of Wagner personnel that he had obtained, complete with an identification number within the structure.¹⁸⁶

The fascist mercenaries eventually did return to a cause that Girkin would call honorable in 2022.

184 "Permanent Base of Russian Mercenaries in Syria Is Discovered (Photo)," *InformNapalm*, September 17, 2018.

URL: <https://informnapalm.org/en/permanent-base-of-russian-mercenaries-in-syria-is-discovered-photo/>

185 Christine Svendsen, "Assad's Nazi Warriors", NRK, November 15, 2020 (in Norwegian). URL: <https://www.nrk.no/urix/xl/assads-nazistkriger-1.15170255>

186 "Russian Nationalists on the Syrian Contract," *Fontanka Russia*, October 19, 2017 (in Russian).

URL: <https://www.fontanka.ru/2017/10/19/101/>

Chapter 5. The Second Invasion of Ukraine

In the intervening years since Russia's undeclared dirty war in Ukraine, Girkin's relationship with Borodai turned sour. Since their return from Donetsk in 2014, the two comrades have traded insults and denunciations against each other in a series of interviews with media organs in Russia and Ukraine. In a 2016 interview with *Argumenty i Fakty*, Borodai characterized Girkin as a self-interested opportunist, eager to repudiate his former associates in order to protect himself. "For me he became a bit like a 'suitcase without a handle,'" Borodai said, "that's hard to throw away but a pain to drag around."¹⁸⁷

By 2020, the accusations became still more personal. Borodai claimed that Girkin had abandoned his wife Vera and their two children, one of them severely disabled, "in a shed" just to shack up with a nightclub dancer from Donetsk. Girkin, for his part, called his old friend "a bastard."¹⁸⁸

Nonetheless, some of Borodai's other relationships remained strong. Supported by his old boss, Malofeyev, and working alongside Kulygina, Borodai founded the Union of Donbass Volunteers in 2015, which ostensibly aimed to support veterans of the conflict and organize humanitarian aid.¹⁸⁹ It has also been used to threaten would-be anti-government protesters inside Russia.¹⁹⁰

The Union of Donbass Volunteers would become an important bridge between many of the participants in the first invasion of Ukraine, producing some striking images such as that of Borodai standing with Rusich's neo-Nazi head Milchakov and the former deputy chief of the Russian Presidential Administration, Vladislav Surkov, one of the main orchestrators of the war.¹⁹¹ Another conspicuous actor in the union is press secretary Maria Koleda, a former member of the National Bolshevik *Drugaya Rossiya* party.¹⁹²

187 Yekaterina Larinina, "Aleksandr Borodai: I could return, but not to Donbas but already to Kyiv", *Argumenty i Fakty*, April 11, 2016. URL: https://aif.ru/politics/world/aleksandr_boroday_ya_mogu_vernutsya_no_ne_na_donbass_a_uzhe_v_kiev

188 "Borodai said: Strelkov threw his wife in a shed with his disabled children", *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, May 28, 2020 (in Russian). URL: <https://www.mk.ru/politics/2020/05/28/boroday-zayavil-strelkov-brosil-zhenu-v-sarae-s-detmiinvalidami.html>; "Igor Girkin's new wife took the apartment from his former spouse and children, who have been forced to flee to the Rostov region", *DonDay*, May 20, 2019 (in Russian). URL: <https://donday.ru/novaya-zhena-igorya-girkina-lishila-kvartiry-ego-byvshuyu-supругu-i-detey-vynuzhdennyh-bezhat-v-rostovskuyu-oblast.html>; "Strelkov answered Borodai: 'He had fun, I fought'", *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, May 21, 2020 (in Russian). URL: <https://www.mk.ru/politics/2020/05/21/strelkov-otvetil-borodayu-on-razvlekalsya-ya-voeval.html>

189 Darya Garmonenko, "Pro-government nationalists are activating under Surkov's watch", *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, October 29, 2020 (in Russian). URL: https://www.ng.ru/politics/2020-10-29/1_8003_politics1.html; "Union of Donbass Volunteers: Current Activities and Development Prospects", *Rossiya Segodnya*, September 23, 2016 (in Russian). URL: <https://pressria.ru/20160923/951235240.html>; Mikhail Sokolov, "Union of Donbass Volunteers Created in Russia," *TASS*, August 27, 2015 (in Russian). URL: <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/2215105>

190 "'Union of Volunteers of Donbass Promised to Suppress the 'Maidan' in Moscow,'" *Krasnaya Liniya*, August 12, 2019 (in Russian). URL: <https://www.rline.tv/news/2019-08-12-soyuz-dobrovoltsev-donbassa-poobeshchal-podavit-maydan-v-moskve/>

191 "Hackers Show the Truth behind Ex-Russian Duma Deputy Voronenkov's Statements about Surkov's Innocence – with Photos and Audio," *InformNapalm*, February 27, 2017 (in Russian). URL: <https://informnapalm.org/en/hackers-show-truth-behind-ex-russian-duma-deputy-voronenkov-s-statements-surkov-s-innocence-photos-audio/>

192 "Activist of 'Other Russia' Beaten in Moscow," *News Russia*, January 7, 2008 (in Russian). URL: <https://www.newsru.com/russia/07jan2008/izbienie.html>

In 2014, Koleda was arrested by the SBU and held in Ukraine for several months on suspicion of espionage for the GRU.¹⁹³



Milchakov (second from left) with Borodai and Surkov (fourth and fifth from left) at a Nov. 4, 2016, meeting of the Union of Donbass Volunteers. Photo from InformNapalm.¹⁹⁴

Borodai also secured himself a legislative position and immunity from prosecution in Russia by becoming a member of parliament. He was elected to the State Duma on the party list of Putin's ruling United Russia in 2021, winning a seat in the same White House that he'd forcibly defended in 1993.¹⁹⁵

When Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine a year later, Moscow created puppet administrations similar to the one Borodai had inaugurated in the occupied regions of Donbas. Once again, the Russian security organs tended to draw from the ranks of the political extreme, although

193 "SBU Announced the Arrest of 'Russian Spy,'" *Radio Liberty*, April 9, 2014 (in Russian). URL: <https://www.svoboda.org/a/25327549.html>; Anastasia Berseneva, "'Ukrainians Forced Me to Confess That I Was from the GRU,'" *Gazeta Russia*, September 29, 2014 (in Russian). URL: <https://www.gazeta.ru/social/2014/09/29/6239581.shtml>

194 "Hackers Show the Truth behind Ex-Russian Duma Deputy Voronenkov's Statements about Surkov's Innocence – with Photos and Audio," *InformNapalm*, February 27, 2017 (in Russian). URL: <https://informnapalm.org/en/hackers-show-truth-behind-ex-russian-duma-deputy-voronenkov-s-statements-surkov-s-innocence-photos-audio/>

195 "Aleksandr Yurevich Borodai," The State DUMA. URL: <http://duma.gov.ru/duma/persons/1056120/>

one of its most high-profile assets met with a far less felicitous fate than a seat in the Duma.

The city of Kherson was the most politically significant settlement captured by Russia in March 2022. This was the only regional capital to be seized since Donetsk and Luhansk, as efforts in other regions had failed to take administrative centers. One would imagine that the selection of personnel for the satrapy in such a prize city would therefore have involved careful consideration. In fact, it was an especially disturbed KOB acolyte, only really known beyond Kherson for filming himself swinging his infant daughter around by her ankles. This was Kirill Stremousov. He became “deputy governor” of the Russian-controlled oblast, half of which Ukraine liberated after a successful counteroffensive and Russian military withdrawal in November 2022.¹⁹⁶



WARNING

News > World News

HOW COULD HE? Outrage as sick dad swings baby around his head like a ragdoll and claims he can ‘hear her bones popping’

The tiny tot can be heard squealing in the shocking clip filmed in Kherson, in southern Ukraine

Screenshot of The Sun article about Stremousov’s baby-swinging video.

Stremousov first appeared on March 16, 2022, as the leader of the newly formed “Salvation

¹⁹⁶ Ed Wight, “How Could He? Outrage as Sick Dad Swings Baby around His Head like a Ragdoll and Claims He Can ‘Hear Her Bones Popping,’” *The Sun*, September 21, 2017. URL: <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/4513146/youtube-video-dad-swings-baby-around-sick-video/>

Committee for Peace and Order” at the Kherson regional administration building.¹⁹⁷ A veteran of pro-Kremlin and anti-Maidan activism in Kherson for years, he had been involved in efforts to organize local Territorial Communes since 2010, much like those later promulgated by Tikhonenko in Kramatorsk and Sloviansk. The two men knew each other, as demonstrated by video messages from Stremousov’s messages on Tikhonenko’s YouTube channel.

Kherson had a well-established KOB presence, most prominently represented by Kirill Kirichenko, a Slavic neo-paganist and a Rodnover temple founder.¹⁹⁸ Several local journalists and activists, including the well-respected Kateryna Handziuk who died in 2018 following an acid attack, alleged that the KOB movement in Kherson, existing in tandem with the Rodnover and the autonomous communes, were financed by Medvedchuk, the Putinist oligarch. Demonstrable evidence of this claim is lacking.¹⁹⁹

Stremousov, though, was certainly an active member of KOB as well as an organizer of “Russian Run” health and fitness events, which were promoted using banners bearing the *kolovrat* swastika substitute and Russian imperial tricolors.²⁰⁰ In 2013, he and Negreba, who participated in the of Sloviansk TV station takeover, attended a summer camp for KOB members in Kherson.

197 “The Faces of the Occupation: How Secular and Religious Collaborators Shape Life in Kherson,” Centre for Information Resilience, October 21, 2022. URL: <https://www.info-res.org/post/the-faces-of-the-occupation-how-secular-and-religious-collaborators-shape-life-in-kherson>

198 Rodnover are followers of a neo-pagan religious movement that claims to have ancient Slavic roots but was largely concocted in the 20th Century.

199 Kateryna Handziuk, “Kateryna Handziuk: Medvedchuk Is Hidden in the Details,” *Vgoru*, November 5, 2018 (in Ukrainian). URL: <https://vgoru.org/post/kateryna-handziuk-medvedchuk-kroetsia-v-detaliakh>; Sergey Nikitenko, “A familiar face among the Kherson separatists” *MOST Ukraine*, July 4, 2014 (in Ukrainian). URL: https://most.ks.ua/news/url/staryj_kon_na_borozde_hersonskih_separatistov/

200 “Kherson Organizes ‘Russian Run’ for City Day,” *Tipichny Kherson*, September 20, 2013 (in Russian). URL: <http://www.t.ks.ua/v-hersone-ko-dnyu-goroda-organizovyvayut-russkie-probezhki>



Stremousov (circled in yellow) and Negreba (in light blue) beneath the flag of the KPE at the KOB camp in June 2013.²⁰¹

The cultic nature of KOB is especially apparent in a scan through the photo album, still visible on the Kherson Health and Fitness VKontakte page.²⁰² Bizarre syncretic combinations of religious symbols adorn the walls as participants sit through hours of PowerPoint presentations and lectures and peruse books such as Petrov's *Secrets of Human Control* or *The Jewish Strike - Or How The Shit Crept Up Unnoticed*. Multiple camcorders are on display, too, for purposes that can only be guessed at.

201 Koba Dzhugashvili Photo (22), VKontakte, July 1, 2013. URL: https://vk.com/sportks?z=photo-14268109_305079764%2Falbum-14268109_176641817

202 Koba Dzhugashvili Photo Album "Sixth conceptual", VKontakte, July 1, 2013. URL: https://vk.com/album-14268109_176641817



KOB posters on symbolism and alphabetic characters at the 2013 Kherson Summer Camp. Photo from VK.com.



Books and pamphlets at the 2013 KOB Summer Camp in Kherson. Photo from VK.com.

On his YouTube channels, which he used as outlets for various “civic initiatives” or media projects, Stremousov enthusiastically promoted KOB, posting and commentating on entire lectures by Petrov.²⁰³



Screenshot of Stremousov reminding viewers to subscribe to his YouTube channel during a lecture by Petrov.²⁰⁴

In December 2013, just as the anti-Yanukovych demonstrations were building in Kyiv, Stremousov and several other KOB followers arrived at a Euromaidan rally in Kherson and waved the Ukrainian, Russian and Belarusian flags.²⁰⁵ One of the men present with Stremousov, wrapped in a Russian flag, was later identified as Artur Kantsir, a Russian citizen from Saratov.²⁰⁶

203 “Konstantin Petrov and an introductory lecture for living people. Part 1,” Youtube Video, posted by “Za Mir i Poryadok”, February 18, 2021. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/live/07dGxFqskXk?feature=share>

204 “Konstantin Petrov and the types of worldview (2nd lecture)”, YouTube video, posted by For Peace and Order, February 21, 2021 (in Russian). URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=85eJLcCCHSc>

205 “Pro-Russian Separatists Are Again Trying to Stir up the Situation in Kherson,” MOST Ukraine, November 12, 2016 (in Russian). URL: https://most.ks.ua/news/url/prorossijskie_separatisty_vnov_pytajutsja_raskachat_situatsiju_v_hersone/

206 “Kherson emperors,” Youtube Video, posted by “FFF”, December 16, 2013. URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AM_m1yD-x0I; “Pro-Russian Separatists Are Again Trying to Stir up the Situation in Kherson,” MOST Ukraine, November 12, 2016 (in Russian). URL: https://most.ks.ua/news/url/prorossijskie_separatisty_vnov_pytajutsja_raskachat_situatsiju_v_hersone/



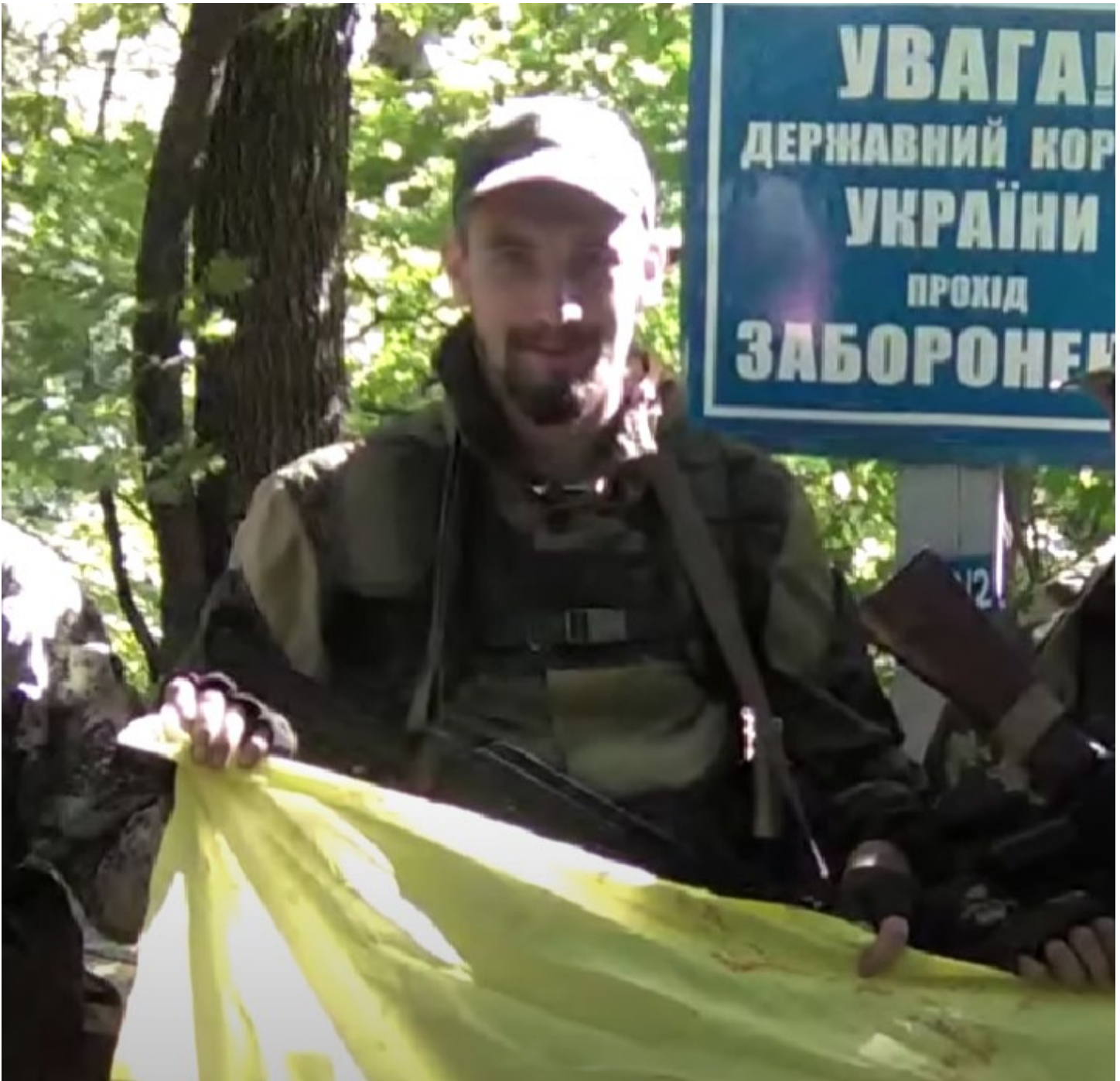
*Kantsir (left) and Stremousov at a protest in Kherson in December 2013. Screenshot from YouTube video.*²⁰⁷

In 2015, Kantsir was named a member of Rusich by the SBU in a report that noted that several of his confederates had been killed in the Luhansk region on August 24 of that year.²⁰⁸ Kantsir's callsign in Rusich was given as "Varyag," as in Varangian, the Viking warriors who established a dynasty in ninth-century Russia. "Varyag" appears on social media accounts belonging to a man matching Kantsir's name, hometown and date of birth.²⁰⁹

207 "Kherson emperors," Youtube Video, posted by "FFF", December 16, 2013.

208 "SBU film about the DRG of the LPR terrorist organization, neutralized on August 24, 2015," Youtube Video, posted by "LBTV", Jan 27, 2016. URL: <https://youtu.be/j50QlRbJQM>; "The SBU Made a Film about the Liquidated DRG of the Milchakov Gang," *LB Ukraine*, January 27, 2016 (in Russian). URL: https://lb.ua/society/2016/01/27/326501_sbu_snyala_film_likvidirovannoy_drg.html

209 Artur Kantsir Profile. Zebraboss <https://web.archive.org/web/20230425173527/https://am.zebraboss.com/follower/vk/78693011/74254149.html?act=full#>



Screenshot of Kantsir with Rusich in a video released by the SBU in 2015.²¹⁰

After Russia's initial invasion of Ukraine in 2014, Stremousov and several other KOB members in Kherson were investigated by the SBU on suspicion of separatism connected with their role at protests in support of Russia at the regional administration.²¹¹ Little came of it. Despite several arrests

210 "SBU film about the DRG of the LPR terrorist organization, neutralized on August 24, 2015." Youtube Video, posted by "LBTV", Jan 27, 2016. URL: <https://youtu.be/j50QlRrBjQM>

211 "SBU Is Looking for Five Kherson Residents Who Are Suspected of Separatism," *Tipichny Kherson*, June 20, 2014 (in Russian). URL: <http://www.t.ks.ua/sbu-ishchet-pyatelyh-hersoncev-kotoryh-podozrevayut-v-separatizme>; "Why Was the SBU Picketed in Kherson?,"

over the years for political violence, Stremousov remained a vocal figure on the margins in his native Kherson, switching alliances between various parties or NGOs, many of which were alleged to have connections to Medvedchuk or his proxies.²¹²

On April 28, 2022, within a week of appearing at the head of the Salvation Committee, Stremousov was appointed by the occupying Russian authorities as “deputy governor” of the Kherson region.²¹³

Notwithstanding his personal history and reputation, he quickly became the main public face of the occupation. By May, he was making many of the crucial announcements on alignment with Russia, in seeming anticipation of Putin’s declared “annexation” of Kherson and three other Ukrainian regions, such as the switch to using Russian as the official language of the region or the use of the Moscow time zone.²¹⁴



Stremousov as “deputy governor” of the Kherson region in 2022. Screenshot from Telegram video.

Vgoru, February 20, 2017 (in Ukrainian). URL: <https://vgoru.org/post/pochemu-v-kherson-pyketyrovaly-sbu>

212 “Kirill Stremousov Detained on Suspicion of Hooliganism,” *Liga*, January 19, 2019 (in Russian). URL: <https://news.liga.net/incidents/news/zaderjan-podozrevaemyy-v-napadenii-na-ofis-gazety-v-herson>; “In Kherson, a Scandalous Blogger Attacked a Journalist, Began to Insult Him and Threaten Him with Reprisal,” *Prestupnosti*, June 26, 2020 (in Russian). URL: <https://news.pn.ru/criminal/237563>; “Why Was the SBU Picketed in Kherson?,” *Vgoru*, February 20, 2017 (in Ukrainian). URL: <https://vgoru.org/post/pochemu-v-kherson-pyketyrovaly-sbu>

213 Administratsiya Khersonskoy oblasti, Telegram, April 28, 2022. URL: https://t.me/VGA_Kherson/1426

214 Elise Thomas, “Briefing: How Russia is consolidating power in Kherson,” Centre for Information Resilience, June 17, 2022. URL: <https://www.info-res.org/post/briefing-how-russia-is-consolidating-power-in-kherson>; “In the Kherson Region, the Russian Language Will Receive the Status of the State Language,” *Regnum*, May 24, 2022 (in Russian). URL: <https://regnum.ru/news/3599108.html>

Stremousov also used his authority to issue threats against remaining Ukrainian civil servants and teachers amid an environment of active popular resistance against his occupying regime, including face-offs with Russian troops and the posting of patriotic paraphernalia.²¹⁵ He warned them not to “sabotage their work,” adding that “attempts at provocations will be severely punished.”

In late October, with a Ukrainian offensive to retake Kherson well underway, Stremousov announced that 46 “orphans” had been taken from the region to Russian-controlled Crimea for their own safety.²¹⁶ This was part of a wider pattern that the United Nations Commissioner for Human Rights has recognized as a war crime and for which an arrest warrant for Putin and Russia’s ombudsman for children’s rights, Maria Lvova-Belova, has been issued by the International Criminal Court.²¹⁷

Not long afterward, on Nov. 9, Stremousov was dead. The Russian authorities claimed that he had been killed in a car crash. Pictures from the scene showed that his SUV’s chassis had been completely separated from the wheelbase and drive train on the highway outside Kherson.



Half the wreckage of Stremousov’s car lying on the highway near Kherson. Photo: VESTI Telegram

215 Elise Thomas, “Briefing: How Russia is consolidating power in Kherson,” Centre for Information Resilience, June 17, 2022. URL: <https://www.info-res.org/post/briefing-how-russia-is-consolidating-power-in-kherson>

216 “Stremousov Said That 46 Orphans Were Transferred to the Crimea from the Kherson Orphanage,” TASS, October 21, 2022. <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/16123393>

217 “Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine,” The Human Rights Council - Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, March 15, 2023. URL: https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/coiukraine/A_HRC_52_62_AUV_EN.pdf; “Statement by Prosecutor Karim A. A. Khan KC on the issuance of arrest warrants against President Vladimir Putin and Ms Maria Lvova-Belova.” International Criminal Court, March 17, 2023. URL: <https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/statement-prosecutor-karim-khan-kc-issuance-arrest-warrants-against-president-vladimir-putin>

channel.

While claims that his car had been shot up before the crash were debunked, it does appear that his relationship with the Russian government had deteriorated in his final days, and it cannot be ruled out that his demise was part of the FSB's "cleaning up" before abandoning the city.²¹⁸ On the day before Stremousov's death, it was reported that the Kremlin had instructed Russian media outlets to reduce coverage of a number of wayward officials, the "deputy governor" included.²¹⁹ Stremousov had recently publicly denounced Russian military leadership for their failure to halt the Ukrainian advance, saying that they were "mediocre" and did not understand the situation on the front line.²²⁰

His funeral was attended by other members of the collaborationist administrations from Kherson and Zaporizhzhia, as well as Aksyonov, the self-declared prime minister of Crimea, who had worked so closely with Borodai and Girkin in 2014.²²¹ Putin posthumously awarded Stremousov the Order of Courage.²²²

Meanwhile, his fellow cult member Yefimov turned up at the beginning of 2023, recording YouTube videos from the glass-walled offices of the lavish Wagner Center in St. Petersburg, the headquarters for Prigozhin's mercenary franchise.²²³ Opened in November 2022, the center is branded as a central hub for the paramilitary group, as well as an events and "co-working space" — a WeWork for war criminals.²²⁴ Here Yefimov records videos alternating in subject matter between his more traditional psycho-political fare and promotional spots hawking herbal teas and water purifiers.²²⁵

Although the Russian security services had gone straight to their network of extremist assets when establishing the puppet administration in Kherson, the initial military invasion had relied on much more conventional forces than had been seen in Sloviansk and Donetsk eight years earlier.

Forces deployed during the first weeks of the 2022 invasion consisted of regular army, airborne, naval infantry, national guard units (*Rosgvardia*) and Chechen paramilitaries loyal to the republic's leader, Ramzan Kadyrov. The hodgepodge of "volunteers" was not present.

But Russian Imperial Legion claims that they had been aware of the impending invasion and had been preparing for war since November 2021.²²⁶ Perhaps as a result, they were not scrabbling for

218 Centre for Information Resilience, Twitter, November 17, 2022. URL: <https://twitter.com/Cen4infoRes/status/1593024494586671104>

219 "Duma Generals Are on the Kremlin's 'Stop List,'" *Vershka*, November 8, 2022 (in Russian). URL: <https://vershka.media/kreml-poprosil-rezhe-citirovat-nekotoryh-deputatov>

220 Kirill Stremousov, Telegram, October 6, 2022. URL: https://t.me/Stremousov_Kirill/457

221 "Who Came to Say Goodbye to Kirill Stremousov. Photo," RBC, November 11, 2022 (in Russian). URL: <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/11/11/2022/636e290d9a7947fed4b6b302>

222 "Putin awarded Stremousov the Order of Courage posthumously," RBC, November 9, 2022 (in Russian). URL: <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/09/11/2022/636bff909a7947566854ad20>

223 "Yefimov Viktor Alekseevich - biography," Zaks Russia (in Russian). URL: <https://www.zaks.ru/new/person/view/733>;

"Yefimov V.A. On Wisdom", YouTube Video posted by Viktor Yefimov, February 16, 2023 (in Russian). URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8om2GuzHu70>

224 "Russia's Wagner Group Opens Defence Tech Centre in St Petersburg," *The Guardian*, November 4, 2022. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/nov/04/russias-wagner-group-opens-defence-tech-centre-in-st-petersburg>

225 "Yefimov V.A. Russian herbs and London tea." YouTube Video, posted by "Viktor Yefimov", March 16, 2023. URL: <https://youtu.be/IMlv8KIRUpk>

226 Imperskiy Legion, VKontakte, May 9, 2022 (in Russian). URL: https://vk.com/wall-10533171_3974

men on the outbreak of fighting. On March 2, the Legion told followers on their VKontakte page that they were not accepting volunteers yet for Ukraine.²²⁷ With plenty of members already in reserves, supporters were told to be patient and prepare for a long campaign.

On March 24, RID released a statement that the “first deca” — using the Latin word for “ten” to accompany their Roman theme — “of the Imperial Legion, under the command of a consul of Dionysius has moved out into the area of combat operations.”²²⁸

There was little further noise from the group concerning activities in Ukraine until May 14, when the Imperial Legion announced that “the riders are on their way.”²²⁹

As one saint said: we live in a time when we read the Book of Revelation like the morning newspaper. Reports from the fields, on which the battle for the soul of the world has unfolded, paint us a truly apocalyptic landscape. It is important that we Russian Orthodox men have found our own place in this struggle. Our place is on the side of God. Our God is Christ!!! Christ is risen!

Three days later, the Legion announced that their acting commander, Denis Nekrasov, had been killed. Their regular commander, Gariev, had already been wounded and evacuated to Russia for recovery.²³⁰ Nekrasov, described by the Imperial Legion as “a warrior of Dionysius,” reportedly died when a shell struck the van he was driving while bringing back a Ukrainian drone his troops had brought down.

On July 2, Gariev and the Russian Imperial Movement’s leader, Vorobyev, published a video announcing that the Legion was declaring a “partial mobilization” for the war in Ukraine.²³¹

A VKontakte post later that month gave an insight into their conspiratorial view of Russian history, when they stated that the only flags they were comfortable fighting beneath were the Russian Imperial tricolor and the Icon of Christ The Saviour Made Without Hands (an Orthodox Christian notion that some icons — *Acheiropoieta* in Greek — are of divine rather than artistic origin).²³²

The Imperial Legion rejected the Soviet hammer and sickle, not because of its communist origin per se, but because they believe it to be the flag of “Ukrainian Khazars,” an allusion to the antisemitic,

227 Imperskiy Legion, VKontakte, March 2, 2022 (in Russian). URL: https://vk.com/wall-10533171_3959

228 “Official communication RID.”, Russkoye Imperskoye Dvizheniye, March 24, 2022 (in Russian). URL: <https://archive.ph/iLQf>

229 Imperskiy Legion, VKontakte, May 15, 2022 (in Russian). URL: https://vk.com/wall-10533171_3980

230 Imperskiy Legion, VKontakte, May 17, 2022 (in Russian). URL: https://vk.com/wall-10533171_3983

231 Imperskiy Legion, VKontakte, July 2, 2022 (in Russian). URL: https://vk.com/wall-10533171_4065?z=video-3560737_456241273%2Fe4e70c786572105ce1%2Fpl_post_-10533171_4065

232 Imperskiy Legion, VKontakte, July 27, 2022 (in Russian). URL: https://vk.com/wall-10533171_4104

pseudo-historical notion of Ashkenazi Jews being descendants of a malevolent Khazar Empire, perpetually opposed to Slavs. Meanwhile, the flag of the Russian Federation is discounted as the flag of “the February Revolution, Freemasons, Vlasovites, Yeltsin, Sobchak and other evil spirits,” a variegated and contradictory consortium of players, to be sure.

The main fighting in which the Legion was engaged at this time was in Kharkiv Oblast, where the initial Russian offensive to take the regional capital had failed despite devastating artillery bombardment. In August, Maksim Shtoler, a veteran member of the Imperial Legion since 2014, was killed in combat.²³³ By the end of the month, the Russian armed forces were on the back foot and were struggling to hold the territory they had managed to seize in the east of the region. Key to this struggle was the town of Izyum, which had fallen at the end of March and would finally be liberated by Ukrainian forces on Sept. 10.

The Imperial Legion had set up base at the picturesque Krasny Oskil holiday camp, spread out in the forest at the shore of a large lake, just under 10 miles east of Izyum.²³⁴



*Imperial Legion fighters at the Krasny Oskil camp. VKontakte Post, August 22, 2022.*²³⁵

But in early September, this site had to be abandoned as Ukrainian forces conducted a swift and successful campaign to liberate occupied areas of the Kharkiv region. A notice on the Imperial Legion’s VKontakte page, posted on Sept. 11, declared that Izyum had been “surrendered” and claimed that the Legion was, of course, the last unit to leave the area.²³⁶ Serbian volunteers fighting with the Imperial Legion claimed that the unit had escaped without taking casualties due to the fact

233 Imperskiy Legion, VKontakte, July 2, 2022 (in Russian). URL: https://vk.com/wall-10533171_4168

234 “Members of Russian Imperial Legion receive medals for the participation in the invasion of Ukraine,” Eyes on Russia, URL: https://eyesonrussia.org/event/event_9904_1661036400000

235 Imperskiy Legion, VKontakte, August 21, 2022 (in Russian). URL: https://vk.com/wall-10533171_4252?z=photo-10533171_457239623%2Fwall-10533171_4252

236 Imperskiy Legion, VKontakte, September 11, 2022 (in Russian). URL: https://vk.com/wall-10533171_4277

they had taken Orthodox icons and performed the correct prayers before them on a daily basis.²³⁷

The Imperial Legion remains in combat in Ukraine, with a new base possibly located near Bakhmut. By the beginning of 2023, Russian state media was comfortable promoting the Imperial Legion, despite their explicit hostility to the Putin government and antisemitism.²³⁸ A Radio Sputnik interview with Gariev was even accompanied by direct hyperlinks to the Partizan Center and a donations page.²³⁹

Milchakov's Rusich has also returned to Ukraine.

In April 2022, Rusich members such as Petrovsky were seen with Borodai at a training camp organized by the Union of Donbass Volunteers in Russia's Belgorod region.²⁴⁰



Borodai, center, Petrovsky, to the right at a Union of Donbass Veterans training camp in April 2022. Photo from Borodai.rf.

237 "The accomplishments of the Imperial Legion in Izyum", Srbska Akcija, September 20, 2022 (in Serbian). URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20220922141137/https://akcija.org/izjumski-podvig-imperijskog-legiona>

238 Imperskiy Legion, V Kontakte, March 2023 (in Russian). URL: https://vk.com/imper_legion?z=video-10533171_456239053%2F207e1b77e1471844d7%2Fpl_wall_-10533171

239 "Denis Gariev - Commander of the 'Imperial Legion' Detachment," broadcast, Na Mushke (Radio Sputnik, January 2, 2023 (in Russian). URL: <https://radiosputnik.ria.ru/20230102/1842793954.html>

240 "Aleksandr Borodai Visited the 'Veresk' and 'Sever' SDD Units," Aleksandr Borodai, April 26, 2022 (in Russian). URL: <https://xn--80abjwan.xn--p1ai/%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B1%D0%BE%D1%82%D0%B0-%D0%B2-%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%B3%D0%B8%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%85/%D1%80%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%82%D0%BE%D0%B2-%D0%B4%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%B1%D0%B0%D1%81%D1%81/%D0%B0%D0%BB%D0%B5%D0%BA%D1%81%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B4%D1%80-%D0%B1%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%B0%D0%B9-%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%B1%D1%8B%D0%B2%D0%B0%D0%BB-%D0%B2-%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%B4%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B7%D0%B4%D0%B5/>; Michael Sheldon, "Meet the Irregular Troops Backing up Russia's Army in the Kharkiv Region," Bellingcat, June 17, 2022. URL: <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/2022/06/17/meet-the-irregular-troops-backing-up-russias-army-in-the-donbas/>

That same month, they were deployed to the neighboring Kharkiv region.²⁴¹ Their most visible presence has been on the front line near the Donetsk suburb of Maryinka since at least August last year.²⁴²

While Rusich has not been involved in the great battles of the war so far, Milchakov's group has had an outsized presence on social media, often championing the most violent and extreme methods of prosecuting the failing war.

Rusich has become the leading proponent of war crimes against Ukrainians in the past 15 months, having released detailed guides on how to torture and execute prisoners of war while avoiding punishment.²⁴³ In March 2023, Rusich posted a statement condemning Russian fighters for not "finishing off the enemy" and leaving a "significant quantity of pro-Ukrainian population in conquered territory" as these civilians were "leaking information" leading to the deaths of Russian soldiers.²⁴⁴

Given Rusich's genocidal rhetoric, in concert with its history of abusing and murdering captives such as Ukrainian service member Issyk in 2014, a recent post from the group's Telegram channel is acutely disturbing.²⁴⁵ Showing a man in the back of a car with his head wrapped in silver tape, the post reads: "One-way trip business class" with a grinning emoji.



Screenshot from DShRG Rusich Telegram channel on April 24, 2023.

241 Tom Ball, "Rusich's Neo-Nazi Mercenaries Head for Kharkiv," *The Times*, April 7, 2022. URL: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/rusichs-neo-nazi-mercenaries-head-for-kharkiv-prjndp9rl>

242 "Cargo 800: Maryinka, reconnaissance in force", YouTube video posted by Smertelny Nomer, October 5, 2022 (in Russian). URL: <https://youtu.be/6SCxa7YNyIQ>

243 Oskolok, Telegram, March 14, 2023. URL: <https://t.me/OSSKOLOOK/5706>

244 DShRG Rusich, Telegram, March 8, 2023. URL: <https://t.me/dshrg2/685>

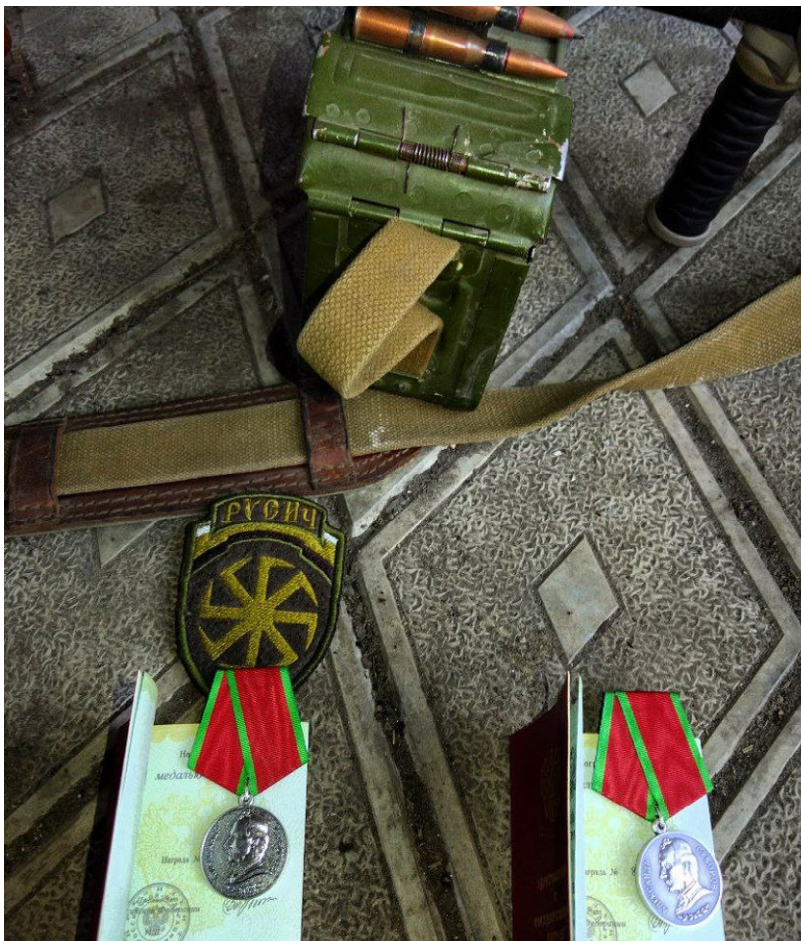
245 DShRG Rusich, Telegram, April 24, 2023. URL: <https://t.me/dshrg2/828>

Witnesses from other settlements captured by Russian armed forces have reported seeing similar sights before executions took place. Here is an excerpt from an AP report on atrocities committed in the village of Zdvyzhivka, outside Kyiv:²⁴⁶

Shkoliar peered through the back window of the SUV at a man slumped against the window, eyes bound with tape, his hands behind his back.

In this case from Zdvyzhivka, the man was one of five who were found shot dead at the same site after being picked up during sweeps for suspected reconnaissance teams.

Despite being the epitome of the neo-Nazism that Putin claims to have launched his “special military operation” in Ukraine to destroy, two machine gunners from Rusich received medals for participation in the war in February this year.²⁴⁷



Screenshot from DShRG Rusich Telegram channel on March 8, 2023.

246 Erika Kinetz, “‘Kill Everyone’: Russian Violence in Ukraine Was Strategic,” AP News, October 27, 2022. URL: <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-kyiv-europe-middle-east-government-and-politics-e3756976cf33cf5de29aa62d61ea7eb6>

247 DShRG Rusich, Telegram, March 8, 2023. URL: <https://t.me/dshrg2/687>

Having overseen the training camp attended by Rusich and other paramilitary units earlier in 2023, Borodai, too, has ventured back onto Ukrainian soil as leader of the Union of Donbass Volunteers. In August, he posed for the cameras in a self-propelled gun, with the emblematic “Z” insignia of the Russian war painted on its side in white, said to have recently shelled Ukrainian positions in an undisclosed area of the warzone.²⁴⁸



Borodai in a self-propelled gun. Screenshot from WarGonzo video published in August 2022.

Borodai has received relatively scant media attention for his return, only briefly registering in the international press when he claimed that his car had come close to being destroyed by a French anti-tank mine in the Kherson region.²⁴⁹

Most recently, in April 2023, Borodai suggested that a new wave of mobilization would be required to bring about a Russian victory.²⁵⁰

Interestingly, Russian domestic media coverage of Borodai tends to refer to him either as a “Rostov MP” or to cite his role in the Union of Donbass Volunteers, declining to highlight his far more prominent perch as the former “prime minister” of the DNR.

Borodai’s longtime chum Kulygina has also come back to Ukraine. In September 2022, it was reported that she was a “paramedic from Moscow” serving with the Grom Battalion, which was formed by members of the Union of Donbass Volunteers.²⁵¹

248 “Russia Lacks ‘Cannon Fodder’: State Duma Deputy ‘Showed up’ at the Front, Video,” *Apostrophe Ukraine*, August 17, 2022 (in Russian). URL: <https://apostrophe.ua/news/society/2022-08-17/rossii-ne-hvataet-pushechnogo-myasa-na-fronte-zasvetilsya-deputat-gosdumyi-video/276949>

249 Ksenia Maksimova, “State Duma Deputy Borodai’s Security Car Blew up on a Mine in the Kherson Region,” *Gazeta Russia*, November 7, 2022 (in Russian). URL: <https://www.gazeta.ru/social/news/2022/11/07/18977065.shtml>

250 “Rostov Deputy Alexander Borodai Allowed a New Wave of Mobilization,” *Rostov Gazeta*, April 18, 2023 (in Russian). URL: <https://rostovgazeta.ru/news/2023-04-18/rostovskiy-deputat-aleksandr-boroday-dopustil-novuyu-volnu-mobilizatsii-2906352>

251 Dmitry Veselov, “Doctor from Moscow Olga Kulygina Spent Almost 2 Months in the NVO Zone, Providing Assistance to Wounded



The caption for this image in Russia's *Gazeta Metro* says, "Although Olga looks menacing, she only helps people in the war."

Girkin, now on the outs with Borodai, has earned a new spotlight for himself as an outspoken Eeyore-ish gadfly, harshly criticizing the way the war is being prosecuted. In April 2023, Girkin began speaking on behalf of a new organization known as the Club of Angry Patriots, seemingly taking up the post as a pressure valve for sulfurous condemnation of the Ministry of Defense.²⁵² In this respect, Girkin competes with or may even be second to Wagner patron Prigozhin in his outward contempt for Sergei Shoigu, the Russian defense minister, and Gen. Valery Gerasimov, the chief of the general staff.

For all that, Girkin's battlefield assessments tend to track closely with those of Russia's most hawkish and ultranationalist military bloggers, themselves unvarnished in their appraisal of how Moscow has fought the war thus far, which is to say, meekishly. Ukrainians have observed with no small degree of irony that it is Girkin who best understands the weakness of the invading army, making Russia's most candid military analyst a convicted-in-absentia mass murderer and Holocaust revisionist.

Soldiers," *Metro Moscow*, September 18, 2022 (in Russian). URL: <https://www.gazetametro.ru/articles/medik-iz-moskvy-olga-kulygina-pochti-2-mesjatsa-provela-v-zone-svo-okazyvaja-pomosch-ranenym-bojtsam-18-09-2022>

252 "Strelkov Announced the Creation of the 'Angry Patriots Club,'" *Kommersant*, April 2, 2023 (in Russian). URL: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5912845>

Conclusion

Sad, desperate fantasists like Girkin or freakish attention seekers like Stremousov would have been easy to discount as irrelevant losers had they not been dispatched into the maelstrom of what has become Europe's most devastating land war since the Second World War.

Many of the people profiled here represent a political force that had supposedly been roundly defeated in 1993. But ideological extremists are both ideal recruits for intelligence services and natural allies to those same *siloviki* — strongmen — whose own worldview is similarly paranoid and rigidly authoritarian.

Extremists also have a surprising degree of influence. Even KOB's Negreba, an obscurantist if there ever was one, has a sizeable online audience with his YouTube channel viewed over 2.5 million times and over 21,000 subscribers.²⁵³

The Russian Imperial Movement has well-developed relationships with a number of Western far-right groups and activists. In addition to training neo-Nazis at the Partizan Center, RID has frequently traveled to international fascist conferences. Its ties to the Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM), for instance, are easily documented: as early as 2015 NRM hosted Vorobyev and Gariev at its annual Nordendagarna festival in Sweden.²⁵⁴



Left: Vorobyev addresses the festival (Nordfront.se);

Right: Vorobyev and Gariev at the festival (Expressen).

Significantly, both organizations have confirmed that RID made a financial donation to NRM during this visit.²⁵⁵

That same year, Stanislav Shevchuk, RID's "representative for Western Europe," Gariev and Vorobyev traveled to Spain and met with Manuel Adrino Lobo, leader of the fascist La Falange

253 Vyacheslav Negreba, Youtube Profile. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/@user-vr7sp7cj3o/videos>

254 "Nordic Days 2015," Nordfront, September 7, 2015 (in Swedish). URL: <https://nordfront.se/nordendagarna-2015.smr>; Danie Olsson, "Russian paramilitaries meeting with the Nazi bombers in Sweden," Expressen, September 5, 2017 (in Swedish). URL: <https://www.expressen.se/gt/ryska-paramilitarers-mote-med-bombnazisterna-i-sverige/>

255 "Nordic Days 2015," Nordfront, September 7, 2015 (in Swedish). URL: <https://www.nordfront.se/nordendagarna-2015.smr>; "RID and the Swedish Resistance Movement", Pravy Vzglyad, September 14, 2015 (in Russian). URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20150916050113/http://rusimperia.info/news/id24919.html>

group.²⁵⁶

In September 2017, Shevchuk and fellow RID member Nikolay Trushchalov even came to Washington D.C., where they met and stayed with members of the American far-right Traditionalist Worker Party (TWP), including leader Matthew Heimbach.²⁵⁷



From left: Heimbach and Shevchuk in front of the White House. Photo: Nikolay Trushchalov on VKontakte.²⁵⁸

In 2018, an RID delegation took part in the [RE]generation Europa conference organized by *Junge Nationalisten*, the youth wing of the NPD, in Germany.²⁵⁹ Notably, this event was also attended by Tomislav Sunic, a director of the American Freedom Party and author for neo-Nazi publisher Arktos, as well as Olena Semenyaka, foreign secretary for the Azov National Corps, which sits on the opposite side of the front line in Ukraine.²⁶⁰

256 Danila Galperovich, "Russian Imperial Movement: mission to the USA", Voice of America, April 10, 2020 (in Russian). URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20200424192442/https://www.golos-ameriki.ru/a/rim-usa-mission/5366919.html>

257 Casey Michel, "Russian, American White Nationalists Raise Their Flags in Washington," ThinkProgress, September 22, 2017. URL: <https://thinkprogress.org/russian-american-nationalists-washington-5bd15fd18eaf/>; More photos from Shevchuk's visit, with a number of TWP members visible at Russkoye Imperskoye Dvizheniye, VKontakte, September 26, 2017 (in Russian). URL: https://vk.com/wall-3560737_61424

258 "Delegation from RID visited the United States of America", VKontakte photo posted by Nikolay Trushchalov, September 26, 2017. URL: https://vk.com/photo-3560737_456240984

259 Hélène Barthélemy, "Last Month in Europe: May 2018," Southern Poverty Law Center, June 8, 2018. URL: <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2018/06/08/last-month-europe-may-2018>.

260 "Leadership," The American Freedom Party. URL: <http://archive.is/ZZ5KO>

And in late 2019, just a few months before the U.S. State Department designated RID an international terrorist organization, Shevchuk traveled to Madrid where he spoke alongside Roberto Fiore of Italy's *Forza Nuova* ("New Force"), Nick Griffin, the former leader of the far-right British National Party, La Falange's Adrino Lobo, and the French fascist Yvan Benedetti at a conference organized by another Spanish far-right group, *Democracia Nacional* (DN).²⁶¹



From left: Shevchuk, Benedetti, Gonzalo Martin of DN, Griffin, and Fiore. Photo: Democracia Nacional.

These Spanish links may be particularly important in light of a *New York Times* report from January this year that American, British and Spanish intelligence officials believe RID may be involved in a series of letter bombs in the country.²⁶² The report suggests that the GRU has used RID as a proxy to arrange these provocations, which targeted U.S. and Ukrainian embassies, the Spanish Defense Ministry, and Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez's official residence.

If RID is manipulated or controlled by Russian intelligence in these international endeavors, then

261 "Spain, focus of the revolt," *Democracianacional*, November 28, 2019 (in Spanish).

URL: <http://archive.today/2020.04.08-012117/http://democracianacional.org/dn/31535/>

262 Edward Wong, Julian E. Barnes, and Eric Schmitt, "Russian Agents Suspected of Directing Far-Right Group to Mail Bombs in Spain," *The New York Times*, January 22, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/22/us/politics/russia-spain-letter-bombs.html>

their entanglements with the European far-right should be seen as something more than ideological opportunism but rather a way of undermining the EU and NATO using both domestic and foreign provocateurs.

Within Russia, the fascist veterans of the original Donbas insurgency and now the full-on war of conquest in Ukraine are paradoxically lionized as heroes of “de-Nazification.” No matter their well-established ethos or even their open hostility to Putin and the current regime of modern Russia.

For Russia, reliance on dangerous and violent ideologues to advance the national interest reflects the way that the state itself has developed over the last 30 years. Critically, while the ultranationalist and neo-Stalinist forces were politically weakened after their failure to remove Yeltsin, the use of force by the security structures and the constitutional changes enacted by the first Russian president’s victorious government ultimately enabled the creation of the very authoritarianism Yeltsin’s enemies pined for.

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