

# An Invasion by Any Other Name: The Kremlin's Dirty War in Ukraine

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*The Interpreter* is a daily online journal dedicated primarily to translating media from the Russian press and blogosphere into English and reporting on events inside Russia and in countries directly impacted by Russia's foreign policy.

Conceived as a kind of "*Inopressa* in reverse," *The Interpreter* aspires to dismantle the language barrier that separates journalists, Russia analysts, policymakers, diplomats and interested laymen in the English-speaking world from the debates, scandals, intrigues and political developments taking place in the Russian Federation.

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# Foreword

Since February 2014, Russian president Vladimir Putin has been conducting a war against Ukraine. He first seized Crimea using unidentified Russian troops whom he later acknowledged as his soldiers. He then began a hybrid war in Ukraine's east, which he still denies waging.

If Putin is going to continue his war policy toward Ukraine, it is very much in his interest to maintain this air of deniability. This helps him deal with the two major problems that his own policies have created.

The first is the Western sanctions that a reluctant European Union has imposed on him for aggression in Ukraine. Hoping that the Kremlin's seizure of Crimea was the end of Putin's aggression, the EU was slow to react to Moscow's aggression in the Donbass. The EU ignored the fact that Kremlin agents such as FSB Colonel Girkin (also known as Strelkov) and Moscow political consultant Aleksandr Borodai organized the Donbass rebellion. When Moscow sent the Vostok Battalion to Ukraine in late May and T-64 tanks and advanced anti-aircraft weapons in June and July, the EU still declined to notice and to impose serious, sectoral sanctions. Those sanctions only came after a Russian-supplied Buk anti-aircraft system shot down MH17, a commercial airliner carrying nearly 200 Dutch passengers.

The second problem Putin faces is the strong opposition of the Russian public to the use of Russian troops in the war. Numerous polls by the Levada Center, a prestigious Moscow think tank, have made this sentiment clear. Putin is afraid that his popularity and support might suffer if it becomes clear that he has sent troops to fight and die in the Donbass.

If Western governments were clear-eyed in regard to Putin's aggressive designs, Kremlin efforts to hide its hand in the war with Ukraine would not be very important. U.S. and, more broadly, Western intelligence would spread the word that the "civil war" in the Donbass was manufactured in Moscow. But such has not been the case. Post-Cold War Europe has gotten used to a historically unprecedented period of peace and prosperity, and many there do not want to wake up to the dangers brewing on their eastern borders. Meanwhile, the White House, understandably reluctant to engage in possible military engagements after the spectacular failures of American interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya, labors under the delusion that the Ukraine crisis is a European or regional crisis—as

if a rampaging major nuclear power can be effectively managed by the EU!

Distracted by the less critical security challenges of the Middle East, the United States and other Western powers have not devoted enough intelligence resources to Moscow's excellent adventure in Ukraine. And even when they have the intelligence capability, they have been slow to release it or characterize it properly. So even as Russian troops crushed Ukrainian forces at Ilovaisk in the late summer of 2014, the White House chose not to refer to Moscow's action as an "invasion." Instead, it chose an old weasel word from the vocabulary of President Nixon, who described an American military operation in Cambodia as an "incursion."

American reluctance to devote the necessary intelligence to Kremlin aggression in Ukraine and to speak frankly about it is a problem, yet in Europe the problem is worse. So when the Obama administration and NATO Supreme Commander Breedlove late last winter spoke of the introduction of major Russian weapons systems into the Donbass, the German chancellor's office briefed German papers that the United States was exaggerating developments.

In this environment, the work of independent researchers has become extremely important. If the governments of the West are slow to identify the danger, private individuals and institutions need to pick up the challenge.

One such institution is *The Interpreter*, which has been covering Moscow's war on Ukraine doggedly and in detail since the start. This report—*An Invasion by Any Other Name: The Kremlin's Dirty War in Ukraine*, by James Miller, Pierre Vaux, Catherine A. Fitzpatrick, and Michael Weiss—is an important culmination of many months of work.

The authors do not hide their intention. In this report, they aim to provide a "thorough, focused account of Russia's dirty war in the Donbass." Nor do they shrink from drawing important analytical conclusions. They correctly state that "were it not for the heavy injection of Russian weapons and Russian soldiers, the separatists would have been militarily defeated in Ukraine's Anti-Terrorist Operation toward the end of the summer of 2014."

The report provides a meticulous and near-exhaustive account of:

- The Russian equipment that has appeared in the hands of the separatists since the hybrid war in the

Donbass began

- The presence of Russian commanders and soldiers in Ukraine
- The introduction of regular Russian forces
- The deaths of Russian soldiers—Cargo 200—in the fighting

The efforts by relatives, nongovernmental organizations, and reporters in Russia to find and publicize information about those deaths

The repressive measures taken by Russian authorities to prevent that from happening

While Kremlin propagandists have been quick to label writers for *The Interpreter* as partisan in their reporting on Ukraine, their work has in fact been meticulous. They judiciously weigh the evidence before making claims about any of the questions of study.

## Overview

With the significant exception of the Russian government, few deny that Moscow is financially and militarily backing the “separatist” war in east Ukraine and has in fact invaded its neighbor.

This report aims to offer a thorough forensic accounting of Russia’s dirty war in the Donbass in two ways: first, by surveying the evidence of advanced weapons systems on the battlefield that can only have come from Russia; and second, by examining all available evidence on Russian military casualties and fatalities suffered in Ukraine.

Based on the analysis contained here, it is the view of the present writers that, were it not for the heavy injection of Russian weapons and Russian soldiers into east Ukraine, the separatists would have been militarily defeated by Ukraine’s “Anti-Terrorist Operation” (ATO) launched toward the close of summer 2014. Instead, Russian materiel and manpower have kept the conflict simmering, with occasional boil-overs, for more than a year with the purpose of steadily expanding the borders of the self-declared “Donetsk and Lugansk People’s Republics,” in flagrant violation of the both the Minsk Protocol cease-fire agreement signed in September 2014 and the so-called “Minsk II” agreement signed in February 2015.

*The Interpreter* magazine, a special project funded by the Institute of Modern Russia, has covered, in real time, developments in Ukraine for more than 550 straight days, starting just before the height of the Euromaidan Revolution. Nearly every battle and data point dealing with Russian interference in the Donbass

They are quick to point out when the evidence regarding the presence of Russian equipment or soldiers is overwhelming or merely circumstantial. They have also brushed aside some claims—such as the recent evidence suggesting that over 2,000 Russian soldiers have died in Ukraine—when they do not believe them to be firmly based in fact.

We owe the authors of this report a great debt. They provide here in convenient form persuasive information about the extent of Moscow’s aggression in Ukraine. This document will play an important role in educating the West about the danger of Putin’s policies.

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has been documented.

## A Note on Sources and Methodology

Many of the citations in this article link to heavily researched reporting and analysis conducted by *The Interpreter* in its previous work; these citations link to their own source material. In cases in which *The Interpreter* has conducted original reporting or translation, has combined multiple sources to cover a story, or has provided significant additional analysis, links in this report will point toward our original work.

Perhaps no single report to date has been more valuable in understanding the scope of Russian military involvement in Ukraine than a report published in November 2014 by the weapons and munitions specialists at Armament Research Services (ARES). That document represents the most comprehensive catalog of weapons used in the conflict in eastern Ukraine to date.

ARES designated certain weapons, vehicles, and other pieces of equipment as “red flags”—materiel that the Ukrainian military did not use or possess at the start of the conflict. ARES was able to document tanks, armored vehicles, small arms, anti-aircraft systems and other weapons and military equipment that are today in the hands of “separatists” and must have come from “external parties,” likely Russia.

This report seeks to go beyond the scope of ARES’s initial investigation by placing the appearance of Russian military equipment in the context of the broader conflict.

# Executive Summary

## Ivan, Get Your Gun: Evidence of Russian Military Equipment in Ukraine

- In March 2014, Russian soldiers spread out across the Crimean peninsula, taking control of government offices and key checkpoints. At the time, the Russian government claimed that these armed militants were local activists, not Russian soldiers, despite considerable evidence to the contrary. Months later, Russian president Vladimir Putin admitted that these individuals had in fact been Russian soldiers.
- Weeks after the illegal annexation of Crimea, armed militants began to capture police stations and government buildings in various towns and cities across the Donbass region of southeastern Ukraine.
- Some of the militants operated with elite precision reminiscent of special forces units in conducting raids on police stations. Several important commanders of the separatist fighters were reserve officers in the Russian military with ties to the GRU (the Russian military intelligence agency). The separatists also received direct support from several high-profile ultra-nationalists who had direct ties to the Russian military and the Russian president.
- The Russian military has been building up its presence on Ukraine's border, starting before the annexation of Crimea and continuing through to this day. Russian soldiers on the border both constitute a threat of outright invasion and also provide a jumping-off point from which Russian soldiers and armor can cross into Ukraine in smaller numbers.
- In late May 2014, as the Ukrainian military operation to retake the Donbass was gaining speed, a group of militants calling themselves the Vostok Battalion, a name that harkens back to an infamous and now-disbanded Russian *Spetsnaz* unit, led a series of brazen attacks of unprecedented scale in and around Donetsk, in what would become the western capital of the self-declared "People's Republics." The fighters, many of whom said they were Chechen, appeared in Ukraine less than one month after Chechen president Ramzan Kadyrov threatened to send troops to combat the "junta" in Kiev.
- On May 26, the day after Petro Poroshenko was elected president of Ukraine, the largest battle in Ukraine to date took place when the Vostok Battalion led an attack against Donetsk Airport. Ukrainian forces counterattacked with jets and helicopters, killing more than 30 Russian-backed fighters. Russian journalists soon discovered that some of these men were "former" members of the 45th Special Purpose Separate Guards Airborne unit—a *Spetsnaz* unit. Days later the Vostok Battalion evicted the separatist leaders from their headquarters in Donetsk as the Russian military took direct control of the fight in Ukraine.
- After two weeks of escalating fighting, the first "separatist" tanks, a convoy of T-64s, were spotted moving from the easternmost territory controlled by the Russian-backed fighters toward the frontlines in the west. NATO soon released satellite images from the day before of three Russian tanks boarding flat-bed trucks just over the border, and an analysis of the vehicles' paint scheme indicated that they were not captured Ukrainian military tanks. The conclusion was that either the tanks were given to the separatists by the Russian military or Russian soldiers were actually driving the vehicles.
- In the following weeks more tanks were spotted across eastern Ukraine, and the Ukrainian government warned that Russian military forces were building on the border. By June 16, the Ukrainian military had reported that there were more than 40,000 Russian troops on Ukraine's borders and 15,000 to 20,000 militants in the Donbass, approximately half of whom were from the Russian Federation.
- The following week, the Ukrainian military continued to make military gains in the west while reporting a reversal in fortune along the Russian border in



the east, where Russian-backed forces were increasing their attacks and even capturing border crossings. The number of tanks and armored vehicles mobilized by the Russian-backed fighters continued to swell.

- Throughout May, a number of Ukrainian helicopters were shot down by MANPADS (man-portable air defense systems, more commonly known as shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles). The Ukrainian government also reported capturing a number of these systems, and an analysis by at least one arms group suggests that some of these weapons originated from the Russian military.
- In early July, a series of much more sophisticated anti-aircraft vehicles began to appear in the Donbass. These included the Strela-10, a relatively fast-moving armored, tracked vehicle equipped with formidable surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) and a machine gun. There is no record of the Ukrainian military ever losing any of these vehicles to Russian-backed fighters, nor would amateur fighters know how to operate a sophisticated weapons system of this type. Once again, these weapons also did not share the Ukrainian military's paint scheme and all identifying marks had been removed.
- Starting in July, higher-flying and faster-moving Ukrainian aircraft began to be shot down by the Russian-backed fighters. The most famous of the weapons used by these fighters appears to have been the Buk, a long-range anti-aircraft missile system that evidence overwhelmingly suggests was responsible for the shooting down of the civilian airliner Malaysian Airlines Flight MH17.
- By the end of August, Ukraine had stopped using its air power to confront the Russian-backed fighters.
- In mid-July, citizen reporters uploaded videos shot from inside Russian territory that show outgoing Grad rocket fire on July 16, the evening before MH17 was shot down. The next day news reports emerged of heavy Ukrainian military casualties. Some Ukrainian soldiers actually crossed the border into Russia to receive medical treatment in the same town from where the Grad rockets originated.
- The soldiers hit by this storm of rockets were positioned in an area known as Sector D. The Ukrainian military had been advancing into this area in May, but by June 4, the Russian-backed forces had captured new positions. The Ukrainian military was thus stuck in a narrow five-kilometer-wide strip of land. Those positions were shelled from Russia as early as July 11, and by August 8, the Ukrainians had withdrawn and surrendered large sections of the border to the Russian-backed forces, effectively giving the Russian military complete control of over 100 kilometers of Ukraine's southeastern border.
- Throughout July and August, large infusions of new weapons and soldiers crossed the border to join the separatist fight against the Ukrainian government.
- One such weapon transported across the border was the T-72 main battle tank. Not only had the Ukrainian military never used this tank in the conflict, but multiple variants of the tank spotted in eastern Ukraine were never possessed by the Ukrainian military because they were modernized versions of a tank that Russia never exported. The first recorded T-72 on Ukraine's battlefields appeared in the hands of the infamous Vostok Battalion mentioned earlier, and the tanks were later spotted at key battles across eastern Ukraine, including those in Sector D and Ilovaisk, which were major turning points in the war.
- By late July, just before the arrival of the T-72s, large convoys consisting of a mix of Strela-10s, T-64s, and columns of armored vehicles had regularly been seen moving on key highways between Lugansk and Donetsk, the two separatist capitals, and on or near the frontlines of combat. The United States warned that large columns of Russian armor had crossed the border. Ukrainian forces were losing ground rapidly.
- In early August, despite retaking territory near both separatist capitals, the Ukrainian military position at Ilovaisk, southeast of Donetsk between the separatist capital and the Russian border, had become unexpectedly encircled by the growing and ever-more powerful ranks of Russian-backed fighters. When the Ukrainians dispatched more troops to attempt to break the siege, they quickly found themselves outgunned. During this battle, Chechen fighters, equipped with BTR-82A armored personnel carriers that were only put into service in the Russian military in 2013, played a key role in closing the trap on the Ukrainian troops.
- By August 24, Russian troops were pouring across the border, Ukrainian military casualties were rising

at a staggering pace, and evidence suggests that Russian military units were at the vanguard of every part of the battles that were occurring. Ten Russian military paratroopers were even captured on the battlefields in the area.

- With the Ukrainian military effectively defeated in Sector D, the Russian military launched an assault against Novoazovsk, a town on the coast of the Azov Sea between the Russian border and the key port city of Mariupol, which had been retaken by the Ukrainian military earlier in the summer. This period became popularly known as the “Russian Invasion,” after the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs started to use the Twitter hashtag #RussiaInvadedUkraine and Russian newspapers began to ask, “Are We at War?” As the Ukrainian military rapidly lost territory over the next week, and with Russian troops poised to launch an assault on Mariupol, Poroshenko negotiated a cease-fire at a meeting in Minsk, Belarus.
- The cease-fire only partially froze the conflict. Russian military forces continued to shore up their positions in the Donbass; in November Russia supplied them with new military hardware like the 1RL232 “Leopard” and the 1RL239 “Lynx” ground-scan radar systems, and by January the BPM-97 armored vehicle and GAZ Vodnik armored infantry vehicle, weapons only used by the Russian military, had appeared in the hands of forces as well.
- Russian-backed forces worked to consolidate their victories by proceeding to shell various Ukrainian military positions every day. Of particular interest to the Russian-backed separatists was Donetsk Airport, a strategically important position at the northwest corner of their capital city, and the site of perhaps their most humiliating defeat the prior May. The Ukrainian forces, who became known as “Cyborgs” for their stalwart defense of the position, came under increasingly heavy artillery, rocket, sniper, small-arms, and tank attack.
- In January 2015, cut off from resupply chains and under increasing pressure from Russian-backed fighters, including the Vostok Battalion, the Donetsk Cyborgs suffered a crushing defeat.
- The fighting in Donetsk only set off another wave of fighting in the area around the city, particularly near Debaltsevo, on the road between Donetsk and Lughansk. Anti-Kiev militants, led by elite soldiers using

Russian tanks and weaponry, such as T-72 models only used by the Russian military, led the assault on Debaltsevo, surrounding a large number of Ukrainian soldiers and inflicting heavy casualties on them until the Ukrainians managed to withdraw from the “kettle” in February 2015.

- Satellite photos, information uploaded to Russian social media websites, observations by the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission, analysis of open-source information, and warnings from the Ukrainian and Western governments all tell the same story—the Russian military is digging in, building forward operating bases between Mariupol and Donetsk, and turning temporary staging areas on the Russian side of the border into permanent installations for invasion preparations.
- At the end of August 2015, Ukraine was seeing its most violent period since February, and there were concerns that the conflict is once again set to explode.

## Cargo 200: Calculating Russia’s War Dead

- “Cargo 200” is a Russian military term referring to the return of the bodies of those killed in combat that first gained currency after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.
- The first major story of such combat deaths, revealing Russia’s covert war on Ukraine, appeared in late May 2014 after the first battle at Donetsk Airport, where at least 40 fighters were killed, 31 of them Russian citizens. An *Ekho Moskvy* blogger covered the story of the difficulties faced by a widow who went to try to reclaim her husband’s body for burial.
- Since then, *Novaya Gazeta*, TV Rain, RBC, *Vedomosti*, *Pskovskaya Guberniya*, *Gordonua*, InformNapalm and other independent Russian and Ukrainian news sites have been tracking reports of Russian members of the military killed in action.
- In August 2014, Ukrainian bloggers reported that Ukrainian troops had found on the field of battle a BMD-2 (a Russian infantry fighting vehicle) with Russian IDs and logbooks that revealed Russians fighting in Ukraine. They also found on the bat-



tlefield the distinctive light-blue berets of Russia's Airborne Troops, known as the VDV. The names of the men in the logbooks were traced through social media; some were found to be dead, some taken prisoner, and some still alive.

- When Russian reporters tried to film the graves of three paratroopers from Pskov, they were attacked and chased away. Lev Shlosberg, a deputy of the Pskov legislature who had been the first to sound the alarm that the Pskov 76th Guards Air Assault Division was missing from their barracks during the invasion of the Crimea, continued to report the deaths of the 76th's servicemen in the Donbass, which led to a brutal attack by unknown assailants near his home in Pskov and his hospitalization in August.
- The Soldiers' Mothers of St. Petersburg, a group that has long defended the rights of soldiers and protested hazing in the army, received a list of nine Russian servicemen, mainly from Chechnya and Dagestan, who were reportedly killed in Ukraine. The Soldiers' Mothers attempted to get answers from the Russian Defense Ministry on these soldiers' fates and even obtained a meeting with defense officials at one point, but shortly afterward they were designed "foreign agents," even though they had stopped accepting foreign grants some years prior. They also tried to work through their members on the Presidential Human Rights Council to get information on these and other cases, but in vain.
- A BBC crew was attacked while trying to follow up on social media reports of a soldier from Astrakhan who was killed in Ukraine. Their equipment was damaged and their film exposed. Relatives who continued to raise their loved ones' cases were threatened with the loss of their deceased family member's pensions, and even the loss of their own.
- In May 2015, Putin passed a decree banning the disclosure of deaths during "special operations"—meaning the undeclared war in Ukraine. The decree followed the report of two intrepid Russian bloggers, Ruslan Leviev and Vadim Korovin, who tracked the stories of three GRU officers killed in Ukraine and found their graves.
- Putin's "hybrid" war against Ukraine has been accompanied by a war on Russian civil society using some of the same methods of anonymous physical attacks, threats and intimidation, attempts at cooptation and outright disinformation.
- In May 2015, colleagues of slain opposition leader Boris Nemtsov assembled notes he had been working on at the time of his assassination along with additional research and published a report titled *Putin. War*, which contains information about Russian contract soldiers, including some from Ivanovo and Kostroma, killed in Ukraine. But both relatives and servicemen then went silent, fearful of retaliation after Nemtsov's murder.
- The assassination of Nemtsov has proven the harshest deterrent of all to following up on "Cargo 200": the soldiers, their families, and the provincial reporters who have tracked them have all been silenced.
- Social media groups such Gruz200.net, Lost Ivan and the Facebook group Gruz 200 iz Ukrainy v Rossiyu (Cargo 200 from Ukraine to Russia) founded by Elena Vasilieva have attempted to verify these reports. *The Interpreter* has reviewed these lists and has found approximately 600 confirmed cases of soldiers' deaths. In addition, there are about 800 cases of missing soldiers.
- A recent sensational story based on text from an obscure website that was subsequently removed claimed that 2,000 families had received compensation for Russian soldiers killed in Ukraine. But the bloggers Leviev and Korovin, as well as *The Interpreter* staff, determined that the story had been faked to drive traffic to this spam site. The number 2,000 is likely high given that 2,000 Ukrainian combatants are estimated to have been killed, and they have died in larger numbers than the 10,000 Russian troops who have invaded their country.
- Despite the challenges to confirming Russian soldiers' deaths, the number of confirmed cases is mounting and continues to embarrass the Kremlin. The extent to which the government has gone to silence the reporting of such deaths in the social media age is an indicator of officials' fears that these figures may affect public opinion.
- So far, by deploying mainly young provincial men from across Russia's vast expanses and sending the wounded to scattered clinics all across the country, Russian authorities have ensured little attention to the war losses in Russia.

# Introduction

In the aftermath of Ukraine’s Euromaidan Revolution, Russia’s military bases on the Crimean peninsula emptied, and armed “little green men” took over government buildings, set up road checkpoints, and surrounded Ukrainian military installations. There was little doubt even at the time that these men were Russian soldiers. Videos show their vehicles exiting Russian military bases; some of the weapons carried were only used by the Russian military; and some of the occupiers even told journalists that they were Russian soldiers. Yet Russia initially insisted that these “little green men” were in fact local residents, part of a legitimate anti-Kiev uprising prompted by the “fascist coup” that had toppled the government of former Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich.

Russian president Vladimir Putin only admitted months later—after those same soldiers oversaw the illegal and rigged “referendum” to codify his annexation of Crimea—that these men were members of the Russian military.

Twenty days after the annexation of Crimea, new “little green men” captured police stations and government buildings in special forces-style raids across eastern Ukraine. These seemingly elite insurgents distributed the weapons taken from police armories to small crowds of waiting supporters before they disappeared, leaving the newly armed rabble in charge of the earliest iteration of the self-declared Donetsk and Lugansk “people’s republics,” breakaway provinces abutting Ukraine’s border with Russia. Also telling was the composition of the “separatist” ranks. Russian citizens, distinct from ethnic Russian citizens of Ukraine, were disproportionately represented and in fact made up a sizable percentage of the separatist leadership. Many of these fighters, it would be shown, also had direct ties to the Russian military and intelligence establishments. Again, Putin denied the presence

of any Russian soldiers in the Donbass, or the territory encompassing southeastern Ukraine; any Russian Federation nationals there were simply “volunteers,” he insisted.

But in these early days of the conflict, there were differences between this operation and the annexation of Crimea. While circumstantial evidence suggested that the Russian military was deeply involved—and was in fact the catalyst for the separatist movement—hard proof of Russian military involvement was initially hard to come by. For this operation, one of classic *maskirovka* (“camouflage” or “hidden”) warfare, the Kremlin was more careful to ensure that it could preserve plausible deniability.

This quickly changed in the summer of 2014. By this time the interim Ukrainian government in Kiev had shown itself to be stable and internationally and locally recognized. For a time, the so-called “Anti-Terrorist Operation”—the official name given to the Ukrainian military’s defensive campaign against the separatists, which was launched in early April—succeeded by at least stalling the advance of separatism.

In mid-April, the Ukrainian military began its siege of Slavyansk and Kramatorsk, two major separatist hubs. By the first days of May, the Ukrainian air force was hammering away at separatist forces in these cities and elsewhere across the Donbass. By late May, despite Russian commentators’ predictions, the separatists had not received an outpouring of local support. Polls showed that even the idea of separatism had little support, even in eastern Ukraine<sup>1</sup>—a situation that sparked frustration back in Russia.<sup>2</sup> As Ukrainian presidential elections approached, it seemed increasingly likely<sup>3</sup> that they would yield a new leader who would be adamant about using Ukraine’s armed forces to engage the separatists head-on to ensure that another Crimea scenario did not unfold in the Donbass.<sup>4</sup>

1 Paul Goble, “Few in Ukraine—Including in the East—Support Separatism or Joining Russia, Poll Shows,” *The Interpreter*, April 12, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/few-in-ukraine-including-in-the-east-support-separatism-or-joining-russia-poll-shows/>.

2 Paul Goble, “Why People in Eastern Ukraine Haven’t Flocked to Secessionist Banners,” *The Interpreter*, July 29, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/why-people-in-eastern-ukraine-havent-flocked-to-secessionist-banners/>.

3 Kiev International Institute of Sociology, “Electoral Moods of Ukrainian Voters Two Weeks Before the Presidential Elections,” <http://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=307&page=1>.

4 Bettina Marx and Nina Werkhäuser, “Poroshenko: ‘No Negotiations with Separatists,’” *Deutsche Welle*, August 5, 2014, <http://www.dw.com/en/poroshenko-no-negotiations-with-separatists/a-17619764>.

The faster the rebels ceded terrain to Kiev, the more Russia significantly ramped up its military support for them. By August, evidence suggests that the vast majority of tanks, artillery, Grad rockets, armored vehicles, and anti-aircraft equipment in separatist hands had been directly supplied by the Russian military—and that Russian troops were leading the attack in key combat areas.

The first trucks ominously labeled “Cargo 200”—Moscow’s euphemism for the corpses of their soldiers killed in action—began returning to Russia after the first fierce battle at the Donetsk Airport in May 2014, as reported by an *Ekho Moskvy* blogger who discovered the story; a *Novaya Gazeta* journalist later recounted the difficulties faced by a widow trying to reclaim her fighter husband’s body for burial. Since then, hundreds of accounts of Russian soldiers killed in the war in Ukraine have surfaced on social media, despite strenuous efforts by the Russian

government to suppress all the news, using a mixture of payoffs and threats against bereaved relatives.

Every single journalist, blogger, NGO activist, or politician who has tried to investigate and publicize the issue of the Donbass war dead has suffered reprisals ranging from intimidation to physical attacks to jail time to loss of employment. Putin has passed a law making it a crime to discuss those killed during “special operations” abroad (the exact location of which he does not care to specify), and now the topic can only be safely covered from outside of Russia.

A close examination of direct Russian military involvement in Ukraine, and of the context within which the intervention is taking place, makes it clear that the Russian government is directly coordinating and leading the fight to destabilize and disunite Ukraine. There would be no war in the Donbass without Moscow.

# Ivan Get Your Gun: Evidence of Russian Military Equipment in Ukraine

## First Stages of War in Eastern Ukraine

In an opening salvo that eventually led to the conflict that has destabilized the Donbass, “little green men”—armed men of unknown origin or affiliation—in April began to take control of government buildings and police stations in key areas of the Donetsk and Lugansk regions. These incidents, which stretched over a period of weeks, followed similar patterns. A relatively small team of militants would descend on the buildings, seemingly unannounced, and, typically in a matter of minutes, and with impressive skill and coordination, would gain control of them, usually bloodlessly. Weapons captured in these raids were then distributed to crowds that had grown outside, and control was quickly turned over to the men who would become the first volunteers of what was called the “Novorossiia,” or “new Russia,” project—that is, the imperialist aspiration to found an ethnic Russian country on territory currently consisting of parts of Moldova and Ukraine.

At the time, there was great debate about what role, if any, the Russian military and intelligence agencies had played in this process. Many of the leaders of this “rebellion” were men like Igor Strelkov (also known as Igor Girkin) and Igor Bezler (also known as “Bes,” or “daemon”), who had reported ties to the GRU, Russia’s military intelligence agency. When Bezler assumed command of his troops, he even told them that he was a lieutenant colonel in the Russian army. Though these men have been identified as former Russian military or intelligence officers, experts point out that men who become “reserve servicemen” technically are not retired, and that while usually “reserved” is operationally the same as “retired,” in rare cases these soldiers can be called back into action. The military efficiency with which a group of supposedly local fighters were able to quickly take over police stations with important armories in towns that are major crossroads on the Ukrainian highway system has also been flagged as a possible clue of a Russian military

intelligence operation.

Furthermore, the separatists were receiving direct support from far-right Russian figures such as Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, a colonel in the Russian army and former vice chairman of the Russian State Duma under the ultranationalist (and xenophobic) Liberal Democratic Party of Russia; Aleksandr Barkashov, the leader of the neo-Nazi Russian National Unity movement; and Aleksandr Dugin, an advisor to Putin and the chief proponent of “Eurasianism,” a theory that the geographical expanse between Europe and Asia, of which Russia is the “heartland,” ought to be the control room of an anti-Western, anti-American, antiliberal geopolitics. Indisputably, the Russian government was supporting the separatist movement politically and diplomatically while it allowed its citizens and officials to openly support the “rebellion” militarily.

Eyebrows were also raised at the frequent appearance of the Vostok Battalion, a group of seemingly elite separatist combatants, on the frontlines of Ukraine’s earliest battles. There are many clues that suggest that this battalion is a Russian *Spetsnaz* (special forces) unit. First, the Vostok Battalion shares its name with another infamous GRU-controlled special forces group that was disbanded in 2008; this unit, which was mainly made up of Chechen fighters, played a key role in the past 15 years in both the Caucasus and South Ossetia. Second, just weeks before it appeared on Ukraine’s battlefields, Ramzan Kadyrov, the leader of Chechnya and one of Putin’s fiercest allies, threatened to send tens of thousands of “volunteers” to Ukraine to stand up to the “junta” in Kiev if the Ukrainian military continued its “punitive operations” in the Donbass. Shortly afterward, men who claimed to be Chechens not only began to appear on Ukraine’s frontlines, but were seen leading the separatists’ largest assaults and taking over the headquarters of the separatist leadership in Donetsk.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout the entire conflict, from right after the Yanukovich administration fled Kiev to the current day, the Russian military has been building a significant force on Ukraine’s borders. These forces, which

are currently within striking distance of Ukraine's northern, eastern, and (post-Crimea annexation) southern borders, pose two very real threats to the Ukrainian government.

First, these large columns of troops could easily overwhelm Ukraine's defenders if a traditional invasion was ordered by the Kremlin. So far, this threat has only been partially realized, primarily during a period of time last August popularly known as the "Russian invasion." However, because these forces grow and shrink at regular intervals consistent with Russian troop transfers, the threat of direct invasion is not a constant.

Second, however, the presence of a Russian force at the borders means that at any time a fairly sizable number of Russian troops, armor, and equipment could slip, likely unnoticed, across the border. Western journalists, as well as citizen reporters, have from time to time directly witnessed this phenomenon. The Ukrainian government also routinely reports that Russian troops and armor are infiltrating eastern Ukraine.

Still, from the start of the separatist movement in early April until the first heavy battles in late May, there was no hard evidence that linked the Russian military to the separatist movement in eastern Ukraine. There was, however, a large and convincing body of circumstantial evidence that the separatist fighters and leaders were encouraged, endorsed, supported, and perhaps even created by the Kremlin and its supporters.

Hard evidence of Russian military involvement, however, would soon make headlines in the Russian press in the form of reports of bodies returning across the border.

## The First Battle of Donetsk International Airport

On May 25, 2014, Ukraine held its first presidential

election since Yanukovich violated the compromise agreement and fled to Russia. In what the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) called a legitimate election, with more than 60 percent voter turnout,<sup>2</sup> Petro Poroshenko, a confectionary magnate and former Ukrainian foreign minister who had run on a platform of restoring peace to the Donbass, through military operations if necessary, won by a very large margin and in every region of the country where polls operated.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, the Ukrainian Anti-Terror Operation (ATO), launched in April, was picking up speed and winning battles. Were it not for the heated rhetoric coming out of the Kremlin and the large amount of Russian troops building on Ukraine's border, there might have been optimism that Ukraine was finally on track to realizing the ideals of February's Euromaidan Revolution.

The next morning, however, on May 26, a key symbol of eastern Ukrainian modernity, the recently renovated Donetsk Sergey Prokofiev International Airport, was attacked and its terminals captured by members of the Vostok Battalion.<sup>4</sup> The scale of the fighting that followed was unprecedented.

By the following morning, May 27, more than 30 Russian-backed fighters had been killed as Ukraine counterattacked with paratroopers, Su-25 ground-attack aircraft, MiG 29 jets, and helicopter gunships.<sup>5</sup> Evidence soon emerged that many of the dead fighters were in fact Russian; their bodies were part of the first Cargo 200 shipments back across the border. Russian journalists soon determined that at least two of the deceased men were "former" members of the 45th Special Purpose Separate Guards Airborne Troops, proving that Russian *Spetsnaz* were operating in Ukraine.<sup>6</sup> (See the subsequent section of this report on Cargo 200.)

Just one day before the attack on the airport, members of the Vostok Battalion attended a rally in Donetsk, where they told reporters that they were Chechens from the Russian Federation, *Kadyrovtsy*

<sup>1</sup> Pierre Vaux, with James Miller and Catherine A. Fitzpatrick, "Provocations, Proxies and Plausible Deniability: Russia's Remote Controlled War in Ukraine," *The Interpreter*, June 24, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/provocations-proxies-and-plausible-deniability/>.

<sup>2</sup> "OSCE Declares Ukraine Presidential Election Legitimate," *Euronews*, May 27, 2014, <http://www.euronews.com/2014/05/27/osce-declares-ukraine-presidential-election-legitimate/>.

<sup>3</sup> "Extraordinary Elections for the President of Ukraine," *Telegraf*, May 27, 2014, <http://telegraf.com.ua/ukraina/politika/1300294-rezultaty-vyborov-prezidenta-ukrainyi-2014-tsik-obrabotata-51-99.html>.

<sup>4</sup> "Ukraine Liveblog Day 98: Poroshenko Wins Majority of Votes," *The Interpreter*, May 26, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-98-poroshenko-wins-majority-of-votes/>.

<sup>5</sup> "Ukraine Liveblog Day 99: Renewed Fighting Around Donetsk Following Airport Assault," *The Interpreter*, May 27, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-99-renewed-fighting-around-donetsk-following-airport-assault/>.

<sup>6</sup> Catherine A. Fitzpatrick, "A Russian Journalist Follows Up on 'Cargo 200' from Donetsk," *The Interpreter*, June 19, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/a-russian-journalist-follows-up-on-Cargo-200-from-donetsk/>.

(fighters loyal to Chechnya's Putin-backed dictator, Ramzan Kadyrov) who had come to defend Russia and Russian interests.<sup>7</sup> And just days earlier, at the close of the conflict's bloodiest week up to that point, Semyon Semyonchenko, then commander of the Ukrainian Donbass Battalion, a volunteer group loyal to the new government in Kiev, took to Facebook to ask for reinforcements after his troops were ambushed in Karlovka, northwest of Donetsk, by a separatist group using snipers and armed with a BTR-armored vehicle. According to a report by Semyonchenko, the Ukrainian force was clearly both surprised and outmatched: "I'm certain that the terrorists knew the route of our movement in advance," he wrote, "since such a concentration of separatists isn't usually seen at normal checkpoints. We're up against highly trained Chechen forces."<sup>8</sup> The attacking forces were identified by Semyonchenko as the Vostok Battalion.

On May 28, the Ukrainian government shot down a Russian-manufactured Orlan-10 drone.<sup>9</sup> The next day, fighters from the Vostok Battalion took over the Donetsk Regional Administration building, which had been used as a headquarters for the separatists. Equipped with BTR armored vehicles, Zu-23-2 anti-aircraft machine guns, rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), and other guns, they dismantled the barricades that had been in place around the building, and set up their own, complete with a sign that read "Donbass only with Russia!" That same day, a Ukrainian military convoy was attacked in nearby Slavyansk, and an assault was launched against a National Guard base in Lugansk.<sup>10</sup>

In Slavyansk, the self-proclaimed "people's mayor" Vyacheslav Ponomaryov told reporters that the fighters who were in control of the city—and who had kidnapped OSCE monitors—were "non-Slavic." Presumably they were Chechen, since there is no record of a different "non-Slavic" group operating in this area.<sup>11</sup>

With fighting and casualties mounting, and with the Vostok Battalion taking charge on the Donetsk front, many reached the same conclusion: the Russian military was assuming control of operations in eastern Ukraine.

## The First Appearance of "Separatist" Tanks

From the earliest days of the conflict in eastern Ukraine, Russian-backed separatists were in possession of various armored vehicles. Some of the armor was captured as these forces attacked military bases or engaged the Ukrainian military in combat. Others were captured from military stockpiles and were restored to working order. The rest came from select units of Ukrainian soldiers who either defected or simply surrendered their vehicles.

But a major turning point in the conflict was the introduction of tanks to the ranks of the Russian-backed militants starting in mid-June. Main Battle Tanks (MBTs) have superior armor and armaments, and the Russian-backed fighters did not appear to have any at their disposal early in the conflict. Crucially, the first time the Ukrainian government directly accused Russia of supplying heavy weaponry to the separatist fighters was during this period.

On June 12, amid escalating fighting, an unnerving statement came from the Ukrainian government. Ukrainian Interior Minister Arseniy Avakov told reporters that three T-72 MBTs had crossed the Russian border. Within hours, videos taken by Ukrainian citizens and analyzed by *The Interpreter* had been geolocated to various towns across eastern Ukraine.<sup>12</sup>

NATO also analyzed these videos and released a statement saying that they believed them to be Russian tanks. The camouflage with which the tanks were painted was not consistent with that used by the Ukrainian military, and the vehicles were stripped of all identifiable symbols and numbers—a tactic used in Crimea by the Russian military. Furthermore, declassified satellite photos showed Russian tanks on the border on June 6. Another satellite image from June 11, one day before the tanks appeared in Ukraine, showed three tanks loaded onto transporters on the Russian side of the border.<sup>13</sup> The following day, June 12, the U.S. State Department confirmed that "three T-64 tanks, several BM-21 'Grad' multiple rocket

<sup>7</sup> "Ukraine Liveblog Day 99," *The Interpreter*.

<sup>8</sup> "Ukraine Liveblog Day 95: Another Deadly Ambush Near Donetsk," *The Interpreter*, May 23, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-95-another-deadly-ambush-near-donetsk/#2847>.

<sup>9</sup> "Ukraine Liveblog Day 102: Has the Vostok Battalion Taken Charge in Donetsk?," *The Interpreter*, May 30, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-102-has-the-vostok-battalion-taken-charge-in-donetsk/>.

<sup>10</sup> "Ukraine Liveblog Day 101: Helicopter Shot Down Over Slavyansk," *The Interpreter*, May 29, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-101-helicopter-shot-down-over-slavyansk/#2935>.

<sup>11</sup> "Ukraine Liveblog Day 102," *The Interpreter*.

<sup>12</sup> "T-64s Appear Between June 12 and June 18," *The Interpreter*, [https://pressimus.com/Interpreter\\_Mag/press/9301](https://pressimus.com/Interpreter_Mag/press/9301).

<sup>13</sup> NATO Allied Command Operations, "NATO Releases Imagery: Raises Questions on Russia's Role in Providing Tanks to Ukraine," June 14, 2014, <http://aco.nato.int/statement-on-russian-main-battle-tanks.aspx>.



launchers and other military vehicles crossed the [Russian] border.”<sup>14</sup>

Before June 12, there was no evidence that tanks were being used by the Russian-backed fighters in this conflict. And yet, a pro-Kremlin Russian news site, *Politikus.ru*, which had previously spread disinformation about the Ukraine crisis, reported on June 9, three days before the first T-64s were spotted, that Russian-backed fighters had captured three T-64s. The report did not offer any details of how these vehicles were confiscated; it simply noted that the event took place in “the suburbs of Lugansk.”<sup>15</sup> There is no other record of any battle or military operation that corresponds with the *Politikus.ru* report, leading to the conclusion that it was a piece of disinformation planted in advance to offer an ex post facto justification for the sudden appearance of the T-64s.<sup>16</sup>

A similar deception was perpetrated a month later to explain the presence of a Buk anti-aircraft missile in east Ukraine just before the notorious downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 in July. The Buk is a large, distinctive, and powerful weapon, and its presence on the battlefields of Ukraine would be sure to draw unwanted attention. On June 29, a little over two weeks before MH17 was shot down, TV Zvezda, the Russian state television network run by the defense ministry, reported that the Russian-backed fighters had captured a Ukrainian Buk anti-aircraft system. TV Zvezda was the only station to report this event. Neither the Ukrainian media, nor pro-separatist media outlets inside Ukraine, nor social media reports, nor the Ukrainian government made any mention of the capture of a Buk. In other words, it appears that this also may have been a cover story planted by the Russian Ministry of Defense to explain the presence of a Buk in separatist hands.<sup>17</sup>

Oleg Naumenko, a member of Ukraine’s presidential administration, which is responsible for communicating with the Ministry of Defense and the General Staff of Ukrainian Armed Forces, told us during

research for this report that “it is very unlikely that the T-64Bs you are writing about have been seized from the Ukrainian military at this time.” Ukraine admits that weapons were captured from its arsenal—just not this particular one.

By June 16, Ukrainian military casualties were mounting and the Ukrainian government was warning that an alarming number of Russian troops, armor, and other weapons were building on its border. At his morning briefing, Andriy Parubiy, the secretary of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine (NSDC), warned that Russian paratroopers from the 76th Pskov Air Assault Division were deploying to a new base in Millerovo, just 20 kilometers from Ukraine. Parubiy stated that 16,000 Russian troops were now positioned inside Russia within striking distance of Ukraine, with another 22,000 in Crimea and another 3,500 positioned in Transnistria, the break-away province in northern Moldova on Ukraine’s southwestern border.

These statements were corroborated by a flood of videos and pictures taken by Russian citizens and uploaded to social networks that showed large columns of Russian military vehicles parked or moving down Russian highways and roads in the general direction of the Ukrainian border. Parubiy also estimated that between 15,000 and 20,000 fighters were operating in territory held by the “militants,” around half of whom were from the Russian Federation. Among these fighters, he said, were Chechen militants and members of the Russian *Spetsnaz*.<sup>18</sup>

By June 18, the Ukrainian military was reporting significant casualties. In a single battle near Schastye, a town north of the city of Lugansk, the Ukrainian Defense Ministry reported that 15 Ukrainian servicemen had been killed in battle, and many more wounded. During that fight, at least one T-64B was rendered inoperable. Video emerged showing a T-64B tank captured either at the close of the Schastye battle or before it.<sup>19</sup> The paint on that tank was very different

<sup>14</sup> “Ukraine Liveblog Day 116: Major Government Operation in Mariupol,” *The Interpreter*, June 13, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-116-major-government-operation-in-mariupol/>.

<sup>15</sup> “Militia Outside Lugansk Have Captured Three T-64 Tanks of the Ukrainian Armed Forces,” *Politikus*, June 9, 2014, <http://politikus.ru/events/21114-opolchency-pod-luganskom-zahvatili-tri-tanki-t-64-ukrainskih-vs.html>.

<sup>16</sup> “Ukraine Liveblog Day 115: Separatist Forces Using Tanks in the East?” *The Interpreter*, June 12, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-115-separatist-forces-using-tanks-in-the-east/#3055>.

<sup>17</sup> “Ukraine Liveblog Day 150: Malaysian Passenger Jet Shot Down Over Ukraine,” *The Interpreter*, July 17, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-150-ukrainian-troops-describe-grad-rocket-attack-from-russia/#3384>.

<sup>18</sup> “Ukraine Liveblog Day 119: Russia Moving Military Convoys Toward Ukraine’s Border,” *The Interpreter*, June 16, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-119-russia-cuts-gas-deliveries-to-ukraine/#3096>.

<sup>19</sup> “Ukraine Liveblog Day 120: Fighting Continues in the Borderlands,” *The Interpreter*, June 17, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-120-fighting-continues-in-the-borderlands/#3118>; “Ukraine Liveblog Day 121: Poroshenko Offers Ceasefire,” *The Interpreter*, June 18, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-121-poroshenko-offers-ceasefire/#3121>.

from that on the three tanks discussed earlier, and an analysis carried out by bloggers indicated it belonged to Ukraine's 24th Motor Rifle Division, stationed in the Lviv region in western Ukraine. The vehicle's sights had been shot out, apparently by a sniper.<sup>20</sup>

This event may indeed mark the first time that any Ukrainian battle tanks were captured by Russian-backed forces, but it happened four days *after* the first appearance of "separatist" T-64Bs, which evidence strongly suggests were in fact supplied by the Russian military.

On June 18, Vladimir Chepovoy, a spokesman for the National Security and Defence Council (NSDC), claimed that two T-72 MBTs had crossed into the Donetsk region from Russia—tanks that were not used by the Ukrainian military.<sup>21</sup> We cannot confirm or deny Chepovoy's claim, but if true, this would indicate the first injection of a newer-model battle tank into the war. The same day, Poroshenko proposed a path toward a permanent peace, which would start with a unilateral cease-fire.<sup>22</sup> Soon, however, the number of tanks seen on Ukraine's battlefields began growing exponentially.

## T-64 Battle Tanks Arrive

By late June, multiple T-64s, which evidence suggests were a combination of tanks captured from the Ukrainian military and tanks supplied directly by Russia, were in the hands of the Russian-backed fighters. But tanks were still a rare sight—although that was about to change.

On June 20, a large number of T-64s were spotted on various roads in territory controlled by the Russian-backed fighters. One convoy containing four T-64Bs was spotted driving from Lugansk to Gorlovka via a road leading toward the Russian border.<sup>23</sup> An analysis of these vehicles shows that they were missing unit markings and were painted in a different camouflage scheme than what is used by the Ukrainian

military.<sup>24</sup>

That same day a significant column of BTR-armored vehicles were spotted in Gukovo, just across Ukraine's southeastern border in the Rostov region of Russia, and the nearby Ukrainian border checkpoint at Izvarino reportedly came under attack.<sup>25</sup> At a U.S. State Department briefing that day, spokesperson Jennifer Psaki told reporters that the United States was confident that Russia had sent tanks across Ukraine's border.<sup>26</sup>

On June 20, military prospects looked stark. Ukraine's ATO was retaking territory in the western theater, but Kiev was rapidly losing control of its borders. Facing a new injection of Russian equipment, Poroshenko called for a cease-fire and announced a 15-point roadmap to peace. The plan called for the demilitarization of the conflict; the laying down of weapons by illegal combatants, who would receive amnesty; the creation of a buffer zone on the Ukraine–Russia border, which would allow Russian troops and mercenaries to retreat; and initial steps toward the establishment of more autonomous local government in the Donbass.<sup>27</sup>

Though the ATO's formerly rapid advance came to a halt, no peace came to Ukraine. Just four days later, on June 24, the Ukrainian military reported that it had lost control of the Izvarino border crossing, mentioned earlier, which became a major hub in the movement of Russian soldiers and armored vehicles across the border. A Ukrainian military helicopter was also shot down near Slavyansk.<sup>28</sup>

Notwithstanding heavy losses and the loss of ground in areas including the border, the ATO continued to advance. On June 27, in the midst of fighting near Slavyansk, the Ukrainian military claimed that it had captured two T-64 tanks. According to ATO spokesperson Andriy Lysenko, both tanks were Russian in origin.<sup>29</sup>

Despite Ukrainian advances in most areas, armored vehicles and tanks—and soon advanced anti-aircraft

<sup>20</sup> "Tracking Russian Weapons," *The Interpreter*, [https://pressimus.com/Interpreter\\_Mag/stream/1827](https://pressimus.com/Interpreter_Mag/stream/1827).

<sup>21</sup> "Terrorists Have Transported Two Russian T-72 Tanks to Donetsk—NSDC Spokesman," *UNIAN*, June 18, 2014, <http://www.unian.net/politics/930087-terroristy-peregnali-k-donetsku-dva-rossiyskih-tanki-t-72-spiker-snbo.html>.

<sup>22</sup> "Ukraine Liveblog Day 121," *The Interpreter*.

<sup>23</sup> "Ukraine Liveblog Day 123: Russian Tanks Advance Through Ukraine," *The Interpreter*, June 20, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-123-for-diplomats-and-doubters-a-ministers-picture-of-a-russian-tank/>.

<sup>24</sup> "Tracking Russian Weapons," *The Interpreter*, [https://pressimus.com/Interpreter\\_Mag/press/9558](https://pressimus.com/Interpreter_Mag/press/9558).

<sup>25</sup> "Ukraine Liveblog Day 123," *The Interpreter*.

<sup>26</sup> U.S. Department of State, Daily Press Briefing, Washington, D.C., June 20, 2014, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2014/06/228103.htm#UKRAINE>.

<sup>27</sup> "Ukraine Liveblog Day 123," *The Interpreter*.

<sup>28</sup> "Ukraine Liveblog Day 127: Ukrainian Control Over Border Weakening," *The Interpreter*, June 24, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-127-ukrainian-control-over-border-weakening/>.

weaponry—appeared on the battlefield with increasing frequency. On June 30, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that sightings of large convoys of heavy tanks and armored vehicles moving toward the frontlines had become common.<sup>30</sup> If the separatists were not winning large battles in which they could capture Ukrainian materiel, then where were they getting their resupplies?

T-64s would go from rare to commonplace to ubiquitous. By mid-August, nearly every video of military convoys on the move and every OSCE observation report would contain frequent sightings of these tanks.

Oleg Naumenko, a member of Ukraine's presidential administration, explained to us that the T-64 is the main battle tank used by the Ukrainian military, given that the Malyshev factory, located in Kharkiv, produces this model; full-cycle production of T-64s, including its various elements, is carried out in Ukraine; and there are plants dedicated specifically to repairing and modernizing this type of tank.

Naumenko also told us that it appeared that the Russian-backed fighters had either received T-64s that were “de-preserved at Russian military bases and moved across the border to aid Russia-backed militants,” or that some of the earliest tanks that had arrived were Ukrainian but had been captured in Crimea and by Russia by sea to the battlefield. The latter scenario is unlikely because of where these first T-64s were initially spotted. As Naumenko explained, both towns where these tanks were spotted early in their journey westward (Torez and Snezhnoye) are in the militants' deep rear. “If they were seized from the Ukrainians, what's the point of moving them from the frontline to the rear?” he asked. “It is much more likely that they were spotted on the half-way [point] from Russia to the frontline.”

## Moscow Deploys Advanced Anti-Aircraft Systems to Protect Assets in Ukraine

Starting in mid- to late May it became clear to Moscow that its efforts in eastern Ukraine were not enough to ensure its two primary goals of (1) destabilizing

and delegitimizing the Ukrainian government; and (2) establishing pseudo-independent “republics” in southeastern Ukraine, perhaps with the ultimate intention of creating a land bridge to the recently annexed Crimean peninsula. The Ukrainian military was ramping up the ATO and retaking territory; elections were moving ahead with little controversy; the international community was questioning the legitimacy of the separatists, not the government in Kiev; and widespread support for the separatist movement was failing to materialize. In other words, if Moscow failed to act quickly, Ukraine could regain control of the Donbass. It was during this period that direct Russian military support for the separatists escalated.

But if the Kremlin was going to send its own tanks, advanced weaponry, and even soldiers into Ukraine, it would need to protect them from an obvious vulnerability—air attack. The May 26 battle at Donetsk Airport, Ukrainian airstrikes against targets in and around Lugansk in the first days of June, and other sorties demonstrated the effectiveness of Ukrainian air power. But Russia could hardly dispatch its own air force, lest its plausible deniability of interfering in the country go up in smoke. The only alternative was to supply anti-aircraft systems to the separatists, first in the form of man-portable air defense systems (MANPADS), and eventually in the form of much larger vehicle-borne systems.

Starting in May, Ukrainian military aircraft began being shot out of the sky. At first, the targeted aircraft were helicopters, which are generally lower flying and slower moving than cargo planes or attack jets. MANPADS, anti-aircraft machine guns, and small arms fire all played roles in the downing of these aircraft.

Some of the MANPADS that the Russian-backed fighters are documented as possessing likely came from Russian military stockpiles. As Armaments Research (ARES), a weapons specialist organization, has noted:

Soviet-era 9K38 Iгла MANPADS... are the most common model in the Ukrainian government arsenal, and appear to be the most common MANPADS in the hands of pro-Russian separatists. ARES has previously documented

<sup>29</sup> “Ukraine Liveblog Day 130: Poroshenko Signs Association Agreement as Separatists Seize Donetsk Base,” *The Interpreter*, June 27, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-130-poroshenko-signs-association-agreement-as-separatists-seize-donetsk-base/#3206>.

<sup>30</sup> Alan Cullison and James Marson, “Ukraine Suspends Truce, Renews Attacks,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 30, 2014, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/ukraine-fighting-as-cease-fire-due-to-end-1404129631?tesla=y&mg=reno64-wsj&url=http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702304344504580000620269860354.html>.

the packaging for a 9M39 missile, fired from the 9K38 system, which was recovered from separatist fighters by Ukrainian government forces. Photos of the crate show paperwork indicating that it was previously stockpiled in a Russian military facility in Yeysk, Russia, with inventory markings indicating it was in storage there as recently as 12 April 2014.

Another MANPADS seen in use with separatist forces is the Soviet 9K32 Strela-2... This legacy system is no longer in active service with the Ukrainian military, and is an early generation system, with only a limited capability to engage Ukrainian Air Force aircraft. Both 9K38 Iгла and 9K32 Strela-2 MANPADS are known to have been in the Ukrainian government arsenal, and previous reports indicate that some stocks of MANPADS went missing early in the conflict...

Perhaps more notably, Polish PPZR Grom MANPADS have been captured from pro-Russian separatist forces. The Grom (Polish for 'thunder') is a Polish-designed MANPADS drawing its design cues from the Soviet 9K38 Iгла. Whilst the capabilities of early Grom missiles were largely identical to the 9K38, the system has continued to be improved and later developments, such as the Grom E2 pictured in Ukraine [have been seen]... The example seen in Ukraine was fitted with a Russian-made 9P516 gripstock, designed for the 9K38. Markings on the missile launch tube indicate it was produced in 2007. One of the few known foreign exports of the Grom was to Georgia, who was believed to have purchased 30 launchers and 100 Grom E2 missiles in 2007. Russian forces are known to have captured some of these.<sup>31</sup>

MANPADS are easier to hide and transport than vehicle-mounted anti-aircraft systems, so it is hard to conclude when these weapons were added to the separatists' arsenal. It is certainly plausible, for instance, that at least some of the 9K38 Iгла systems were acquired as the Russian-backed fighters captured Ukrainian military positions and stockpiles and were then transported to other parts of the battlefield at

other times.

However, soon the separatist arsenal would swell with the addition of large and sophisticated anti-aircraft weapons that are much harder to obscure, and the provenance of which is less easily explainable.

## Sophisticated Surface-to-Air Missile Systems Appear on the Streets of Lugansk and Russian Troops Build on the Border

On July 1, 2014, Poroshenko announced the end of the 10-day cease-fire, because, as he put it, despite an extension of the original truce by another three days, there was no evidence that the Russian-backed fighters were willing to stop fighting or compromise in any way. As far as the Ukrainian government was concerned, the separatists represented an illegal insurgency, and if they were unwilling to sue for peace, then it was the responsibility of the Ukrainian military to find another solution to the crisis. Furthermore, there was serious concern that the Russian military was taking advantage of the relative lull in fighting to strengthen the separatist positions.<sup>32</sup>

The decision made sense. The reality was that the Russian military was ramping up its support of the separatists, cease-fire or not. The Ukrainian military, on the other hand, although it was quickly winning victories in areas where it was on the offensive, was rapidly losing territory where it was on the defensive—at the border. The common belief presented by military analysts such as Dmytro Tymchuk, a former member of Ukraine's military and a well-known military analyst close to the Poroshenko government, was that the Ukrainian military could retake most or all of the country rapidly if it pressed the advance. The truce was only weakening the country.<sup>33</sup>

After consulting with his national security team and military advisors, Poroshenko announced that the cease-fire was over. The Ukrainian military immediately sprang into action. By the end of the day on July 1, the ATO had deployed a significant amount of armor near both Lugansk and Donetsk. On the western

<sup>31</sup> Jonathan Ferguson and N. R. Jenzen-Jones, *Raising Red Flags: An Examination of Arms and Munitions in the Ongoing Conflict in Ukraine* (Armament Research Services [ARES], 2014), 52, <http://armamentresearch.com/Uploads/Research%20Report%20No.%203%20-%20Raising%20Red%20Flags.pdf>.

<sup>32</sup> "Ukraine Liveblog Day 134: Poroshenko Vows to 'Attack and Defend Our Land,'" *The Interpreter*, July 1, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-134-poroshenko-vows-to-attack-and-defend-our-land/#3227>.

<sup>33</sup> David M. Herszenhorn, "Putin Warns Again of Force as Ukraine Fighting Spreads," *New York Times*, July 1, 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/02/world/europe/ukraine.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/02/world/europe/ukraine.html?_r=1).





9K35 Strela-10 surface-to-air missile system on parade during Victory Day celebrations in separatist-held Lugansk on May 9, 2015. Photo: Taras Dudnik / TASS

front, the ATO's sights appear to have been locked on Kramatorsk and Slavyansk, northwest of Donetsk. Within hours, the military had also recaptured the Dolzhansky checkpoint on the border with Russia. An intense gunfight broke out in the center of Donetsk as Ukrainian troops pushed the assault.

But there was already a feeling of foreboding. The Russian government was making unusually heated statements about the end of the cease-fire that indicated that it viewed the renewed ATO as completely unacceptable. Furthermore, Andrei Babitsky, a journalist for *Radio Svoboda* (RFE/RL), interviewed a separatist officer in Donetsk who pledged to "burrow" into the civilian populace of the city if Ukraine were to try to capture it: "Kiev has two opportunities," the officer reportedly said. "Either raze the city to the ground, like Grozny, and only then bring in troops, or gradually fight district by district, suffering giant losses all the while. The first option is impossible due

to the reaction of the world community, which will be sharply negative due to the massive loss of the civilian population. The second will provoke opposition inside the country. No matter what Poroshenko chooses, this war will become his grave."<sup>34</sup>

By the morning of July 2, 2014, the Ukrainian government was seeing the first fruits of the new, stronger, and broader wave of the ATO, which had attacked over 100 separatist positions in a single day. Poroshenko also sent a signal that he was willing to negotiate a new cease-fire, but that the release of "hostages" and the return of the control of the border from Russia would be prerequisites for any deal. Meanwhile, the Ukrainian Border Service was warning that new Russian troops and armored vehicles had been spotted at the border and a new anti-aircraft system was discovered on the streets of Lugansk, one that would be an omen of things to come—the 9K35 Strela-10.<sup>35</sup>

The Strela-10 (not to be confused with the Strela-2

<sup>34</sup> "Ukraine Liveblog Day 134," *The Interpreter*.

<sup>35</sup> "Ukraine Liveblog Day 135: New Ukraine Offensive Yielding Results," *The Interpreter*, July 2, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-135-new-ukraine-offensive-yielding-results>.

discussed previously) is a short-range anti-aircraft missile launcher mounted to the top of the chassis of the MT-LB tracked armored vehicle. It is capable of operating either alone, without the integration of a sophisticated radar network, or in conjunction with other anti-aircraft and radar systems. It is also designed to destroy low-flying aircraft such as ground-attack aircraft and helicopters. Capable of traveling over 60 kilometers per hour- and typically equipped with a 7.62-millimeter caliber machine gun, the Strela-10 is ideal for armed convoy travel in combat.

As ARES noted, the presence of the Strela-10 in the ranks of the Russian-backed fighters represented “serious improvement in their capability to engage aircraft. Their greater range and capability has contributed to the loss of several aircraft in Ukraine.”<sup>36</sup> Additionally, the Ukrainian and Russian militaries both carry the Strela-10 in their arsenals, and Russian-backed fighters claimed to have captured the weapon from the Ukrainians. However, there is evidence that this system, which appeared in early July, had been imported from Russia.

Video of Strela-10 indicates that it was part of a large military convoy that passed through Lugansk on July 2. The road on which the convoy was traveling is well known to Ukraine watchers because just two weeks later, on July 17, the Buk anti-aircraft system that almost certainly shot down MH17 was spotted moving in the opposite direction—back toward the Russian border—minus one missile from its launcher. The road on which it was seen lies through territory controlled by the Russian-backed fighters, continuing on to Krasnodon and multiple border crossings.<sup>37</sup>

The vehicles in the convoy spotted on July 2, and another convoy containing a Strela-10 that was spotted on July 5,<sup>38</sup> appear to have had the same camouflage scheme that has come to be associated with many of the armored vehicles used by the Russian-backed fighters. Also, there is no record of the Russian-backed fighters having captured or disabled a Strela-10 system.

Oleg Naumenko also expressed doubt that any Strela-10 weapons systems were captured from the Ukrainian military. As he told us, the “Ukrainian

Army has such guns, but it is very unlikely that Russia-backed militants seized them from the Ukrainian servicemen. [The] Ukrainian Army was on the offensive and it would be illogical to have Strela-10 in the vanguard. On the other hand, militants were interested in having Strela-10 as the means of air defense against Ukrainian military aviation. As you remember, a number of Ukrainian airplanes were taken down by the militants last summer.”

Furthermore, Naumenko said, the idea that Russian-backed fighters were capable of operating such state-of-the-art weaponry without the technical assistance, if not leadership, of professional soldiers simply beggars belief.

“It’s evident that Russian troops remain in eastern Ukraine and play the leading role in coordinating and directing militant actions,” he observed. “Back then, these were mainly Russian intelligence and Special Forces operatives whose main task was to seize strategically important areas with a lightning speed and then act behind the militants.”

Soon after, observers such as ARES noted the appearance of surface-to-air missile systems like the 9K33M3 “Osa,” which is a long fixed-wing jet that flies at higher altitudes than helicopters. To date, the most well-known and tragic incident involving the use of an SAM is the downing of a civilian commercial plane, MH17, by yet another model anti-aircraft system, the Buk.<sup>39</sup>

The following Ukrainian aircraft were shot down in summer 2014:

### May—four aircraft, all helicopters

May 2: Two Mil Mi-24P Hind attack helicopters were shot down by MANPADS near Slavyansk on the same day a Mil Mi-8MT transport helicopter was heavily damaged by small arms fire near Slavyansk.<sup>40</sup>

### June—two aircraft, both fixed-wing

June 6: An Antonov-30 aerial cartography aircraft was shot down near Drobyshevo, north of Slavyansk and to the northwest of Donetsk. Video footage

<sup>36</sup> Ferguson and Jenzen-Jones, *Raising Red Flags*, 76.

<sup>37</sup> “Strela-10 Appears in Ukraine on July 2, 2014, on Road Which Leads to Russia,” *The Interpreter*, [https://pressimus.com/interpreter\\_mag/stream/1798](https://pressimus.com/interpreter_mag/stream/1798).

<sup>38</sup> “Ukraine Liveblog Day 143: Ukraine Prepares to Move on Donetsk,” *The Interpreter*, July 10, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-143-ukraine-prepares-to-move-on-donetsk/#3314>.

<sup>39</sup> James Miller and Michael Weiss, “How We Know Russia Shot Down MH17,” *Daily Beast*, July 17, 2015, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/07/17/how-we-know-russia-shot-down-mh17.html>.

<sup>40</sup> Aviation Safety Network, “ASN Wikibase Occurrence #165938,” <http://aviation-safety.net/wikibase/wiki.php?id=165938>.



shows one of the plane's engines on fire, suggesting a heat-seeking weapon, likely a MANPADS, as the source of the attack.<sup>41</sup>

June 14: An Ilyushin 76MD strategic air-lifter (cargo and crew transporter) was shot down near Lugansk, killing 40 soldiers and 9 crewmembers. Initial reports from the Ukrainian military indicate that three “stinger-like” heat-seeking missiles took down the aircraft as it began its descent into Lugansk Airport.<sup>42</sup> According to the official statement from the Ukrainian government, the aircraft was hit by an 9K39 Igla missile and subsequently by machine gun-fire as it tried to land.<sup>43</sup>

## July—four fixed-wing aircraft, one civilian airliner

July 14: An Antonov An-26 transport aircraft was shot down over the Izvarino border crossing, in southeastern Ukraine. The Ukrainian government says the aircraft was flying at an altitude of 6,500 meters at the time that it was hit by a missile.<sup>44</sup> The maximum range for an Igla is 3,500 meters, with other MANPADS having similar ranges. The Ukrainian military spokesperson Andriy Lysenko said that the missile that hit the An-26 was either a more sophisticated surface-to-air missile or was fired from a jet fighter, not a shoulder-fired rocket. Lysenko told the press that “the An-26 was struck by other, more powerful weapons, probably from Russian territory.” One theory he circulated was that the plane was hit by a missile fired from a Pantsir-S1, a truck-mounted advanced medium-range anti-aircraft system that is also equipped with heavy anti-aircraft artillery, making it an effective weapon for operation near the frontlines.<sup>45</sup> The Pantsir entered Russian service in 2007 and has never been exported to Ukraine. There are two geolocatable sightings of Pantsirs in Ukraine: a photo, taken in January 2015<sup>46</sup> in separatist-held Makeyevka, east of Donetsk, and a video, filmed in Lugansk on February 2, 2015.<sup>47</sup>

Another theory quickly emerged when a pro-Kremlin Russian news outlet, *Vzglyad.ru*, wrote that the An-26 was shot down not by a missile fired from Russia, but by a Buk missile fired from within territory controlled by the Russian-backed fighters.<sup>48</sup> The Buk is the same missile that shot down MH17 just three days later.

July 16: A Sukhoi Su-25M1 jet fighter was shot down near the Russian border close to Amvrosiyivka, southeast of Ilovaik. In a detailed report released on July 18, the Ukrainian government claimed that this jet was shot down by a Russian MiG-29, flying on the Russian side of the border. “To destroy the target, the command of the Russian Air Force ordered the pilot of a MiG-29 plane to use an R-27T (AA-10 Alamo-B) medium range Infra Red homing air-to-air missile,” said ATO spokesperson Andriy Lysenko. “This type of missile cannot be detected by the Su-25's SPO-15 radiation warning receiver, and neither can it be detected by satellite surveillance systems or post-launch surveillance systems.”<sup>49</sup>

July 17: Civilian airliner Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 was shot down. An overwhelming body of evidence compiled by our team and published in *The Interpreter* and the *Daily Beast* indicate that a Buk anti-aircraft missile in the hands of Russian-backed fighters destroyed the airliner after these fighters mistook it for a Ukrainian military transport plane. Strong evidence suggests that the weapon traveled from Russia the morning of the incident, and video footage from after the incident shows a Buk missing a missile in Lugansk on the road that leads to the Russian border. For details, read our comprehensive report on the *Daily Beast*.<sup>50</sup>

July 23: Two Sukhoi Su-25 aircraft were shot down over Shakhtarsk, east of Donetsk. An aide for Alexander Borodai, leader of the Russian-backed separatists, claimed that these jets were both shot down by shoulder-fired missiles. A spokesperson for the Ukrainian military told reporters that both jets were shot down by anti-aircraft missiles fired from across the Russian

<sup>41</sup> “Ukraine Liveblog Day 109: Fighting in the Border Region Intensifies,” *The Interpreter*, June 6, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-109-fighting-in-the-border-region-intensifies/#3002>.

<sup>42</sup> “Ukraine Crisis: Military Plane Shot Down in Luhansk,” BBC, June 14, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-27845313>.

<sup>43</sup> Aviation Safety Network, “Criminal Occurrence Description,” <http://aviation-safety.net/database/record.php?id=20140614-0>.

<sup>44</sup> Aviation Safety Network, “Criminal Occurrence Description,” <http://aviation-safety.net/database/record.php?id=20140714-0>.

<sup>45</sup> “Ukraine Liveblog Day 147: Ukrainian Forces Retake Several Villages Around Lugansk,” *The Interpreter*, July 14, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-147-ukrainian-forces-retake-several-villages-around-lugansk/#3334>.

<sup>46</sup> Bellingcat, <http://bellingcat-vehicles.silk.co/page/1085-Makeevka%3A-Pantsir-S1>.

<sup>47</sup> Bellingcat, <http://bellingcat-vehicles.silk.co/page/1136-Luhansk%3A-Pantsir-S1>.

<sup>48</sup> Catherine A. Fitzpatrick, “Evidence of Separatists’ Possession of Buk System Before Downing of MH17,” *The Interpreter*, July 27, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/evidence-of-separatists-possession-of-buk-system-before-downing-of-mh17/>.

<sup>49</sup> Ukraine Crisis Media Center, press briefing, July 18, 2014, <http://uacrisis.org/6232-rechnik-rnbo>.

<sup>50</sup> Miller and Weiss, “How We Know Russia Shot Down MH17.”

border while they were flying at an altitude of 6,000 meters.<sup>51</sup> CNN reported that the aircraft were flying at 5,200 feet. The source of the discrepancy is not clear; perhaps both altitudes are correct, since there were two planes shot down. Both altitudes given by the Ukrainian military are too high for MANPADS to have been involved—a more sophisticated anti-aircraft weapons system would have been required.<sup>52</sup>

### August—four aircraft, all fixed-wing

August 7: A Mikoyan MiG-29 jet fighter was shot down near Yenakievo, northeast of Donetsk. The aircraft exploded in mid-air.<sup>53</sup> Video footage shows a large debris field spread across a large distance, supporting this theory. According to *Ukrainska Pravda*, the Ukrainian military said that the probable culprit was a Buk, the same missile that shot down MH17.<sup>54</sup> Whereas most surface-to-air and air-to-air missiles use infrared heat-seeking technology to target an aircraft's engines, a Buk uses a radar-proximity fuse that explodes when it is close to the aircraft, ripping the aircraft apart. Yenakievo is between the MH17 crash site and Gorlovka, and was at the time of this incident on the disputed eastern edge of the self-declared Donetsk People's Republic.

August 17: Another Mikoyan MiG-29 was shot down, this time near Lugansk.

August 20: A Sukhoi Su-24M bomber was shot down near Lugansk.

August 29: A Sukhoi Su-25M1 was shot down near Starbeshevo, southeast of Donetsk. The Ukrainian military said that a Russian anti-aircraft missile was responsible. A video of the wreckage taken by the Russian TV outlet *Lifenews*, which has close ties to the Russian military and intelligence apparatus, shows debris from the plane scattered across a fairly large area and suggests that the plane crashed near a battlefield, as the land was littered with a large amount of destroyed tanks and armored vehicles.<sup>55</sup> Pictures posted on another website also reportedly show the

wreckage.<sup>56</sup> To our knowledge, this wreckage has not been analyzed. The Ukrainian military denied reports put forth by separatists that four Su-25s were shot down that day.<sup>57</sup>

Several other aircraft were damaged in the summer of 2014 but did not crash, and still others were destroyed while on the ground. In particular, on July 2, 2014, an Su-24M bomber was damaged when one of its engines was hit by a missile, reportedly fired by MANPADS, but the aircraft managed to return to base.<sup>58</sup>

By the end of August, the Ukrainian military had effectively grounded its aircraft because of an inability to counter enemy deterrence efforts.

## Russian Military Shells Ukraine from Russia

One of the most compelling and earliest pieces of evidence that the Russian military was directly involved in the conflict in Ukraine was the discovery that Ukrainian troops were being shelled from positions inside the Russian Federation.

On July 16, 2014, one day before MH17 was shot down, a series of videos emerged that claimed to show Grad rockets being fired from Russian territory into Ukraine. The BM-21 Grad, which means “hail” in Russian, is a multiple-launch rocket system (MLRS) that fires up to 40 rounds in about 20 seconds. The rockets, which have a maximum range of 20 kilometers, are known to be fairly inaccurate, effective at blanketing an area with artillery shells but incapable of precision fire. The videos were uploaded by Russian residents of the Rostov region just on the other side of the border. By triangulating different camera angles, *The Interpreter* was able to conclusively determine that the rockets were being fired from multiple positions inside Russian territory.<sup>59</sup>

The next day, video emerged of 15 injured Ukrainian soldiers from the 72nd Border Brigade be-

51 Aaron Katersky, “Ukraine Says Two Jets Downed by Missiles Fired by Russia,” ABC News, July 23, 2014, <http://abcnews.go.com/International/ukraine-jets-downed-missiles-fired-russia/story?id=24674661>.

52 Phil Black, Barbara Starr, and Brian Todd, “Ukraine: Two Military Jets Shot Down Over Donetsk,” CNN, July 23, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/07/23/world/europe/ukraine-crisis/index.html>.

53 Aviation Safety Network, “ASN Wikibase Occurrence #168283,” <http://aviation-safety.net/wikibase/wiki.php?id=168283>.

54 “Ukraine Liveblog Day 171: Barricades Burn Once Again as Authorities Try to Clear Maidan,” *The Interpreter*, August 7, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-171-barricades-burn-once-again-as-authorities-try-to-clear-maidan/#3694>.

55 “Burned Tanks and Infantry Fighting Vehicles in the Fields Near the APU Starobeshevo—Exclusive Footage,” *Lifenews.ru*, September 3, 2014, <http://lifenews.ru/news/139701>.

56 “Downed in Starobeshevo August 29 Su-25M1,” *Militarizm*, September 4, 2014, <http://militarizm.livejournal.com/39552.html>.

57 Aviation Safety Network, “ASN Wikibase Occurrence #169382,” <http://aviation-safety.net/wikibase/wiki.php?id=169382>.

58 Aviation Safety Network, “ASN Wikibase Occurrence #167738,” <http://aviation-safety.net/wikibase/wiki.php?id=167738>.



Russian T-72BM tank near Makeyevka, just east of Donetsk, on August 23, 2014. Photo: Sergei Grits / AP Photo

ing treated in a hospital in Russia—in the same town that launched the Grad rockets—after their positions were hit by incoming rocket fire.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, the position where these soldiers were hit by the rockets matches the estimated trajectory of the rockets captured by video taken the day before.<sup>61</sup>

This was not only unmistakable evidence of Russian military involvement in this conflict, but also a sign of continued escalation. For weeks our team had been warning that despite the relative absence of media coverage, the Russian military was ramping up its involvement in Ukraine and the conflict was about to explode. Little, of course, did we know that the next day a civilian airliner would be shot down and Ukraine would once again be front-page international news.

The prime targets of the July attacks were

Ukrainian forces in a narrow strip of land along the border with Russia known as Sector D.<sup>62</sup> After June 4, 2014, when Russian-backed forces took control of Sverdlovsk, in the Lugansk region, Ukrainian control was restricted to a five-kilometer-wide area between that town and the border at Krasnopartizansk. Sector D ran from this area along approximately 120 kilometers of the border of both the Lugansk and the Donetsk regions.

Pressed with artillery fire from separatist forces to the north and the west, and the intervention of Russian artillery on the other side of the border, the defenders of Sector D were left devastated, leading to the collapse of the pocket and the abandonment of the border.

One of the earliest and deadliest incidents of cross-border shelling took place on July 11.<sup>63</sup> That night, a Ukrainian military camp near the village of

<sup>59</sup> James Miller and Michael Weiss, “Russia Is Firing Missiles at Ukraine,” *Foreign Policy*, July 17, 2014, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/07/17/russia-is-firing-missiles-at-ukraine/>.

<sup>60</sup> “Ukraine Liveblog Day 150,” *The Interpreter*.

<sup>61</sup> “Ukraine Liveblog Day 150,” *The Interpreter*.

<sup>62</sup> Pierre Vaux, “Ukrainian Troops Retreat from Russian Border, Leaving 100 Kilometers Open to Invasion,” *Daily Beast*, August 12, 2014, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/08/12/ukrainian-troops-retreat-from-russian-border-leaving-100-kilometers-defenseless-against-invasion.html>.

<sup>63</sup> “Ukraine Liveblog Day 144: 30 Ukrainian Soldiers Killed Near Russia’s Border,” *The Interpreter*, July 11, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-144-30-ukrainian-soldiers-killed-near-russias-border/#3318>.



**Ukrainian and Russian-backed forces in Sector D in July 2014, with selected artillery firing and impact sites**



Zelyonopolye, less than eight kilometers from the Russian border, was shelled with Grad rockets and 152-millimeter artillery.

Yevgeny Zhukov, a soldier in the 79th Airborne Brigade, wrote that prior to the attack the base was regarded as a safe location, a place for soldiers to rest and reload away from the frontline to the north. He described the attack as follows:

Our guys had been flat-out nailed by artillery! Caught by surprise. Mike arrived at 4:15 and literally 10 minutes after they stopped, huge blasts rolled out across the whole perimeter of the camp. Grads, following up 152-mm "wild boars." And, after all that, the ammo began spewing up for 4–6 hours, and shrapnel whizzed off from these shells, etc. Those people (who survived) lay under their vehicles... For most, this was a huge shock! Because this site had never been shelled before, and the people who lived there, due to the circumstances, had simply let their guard down... And this was not a battle outside Zelyonopolye, as the media reported[:] this was prepared in advance, a precisely rehearsed, massive

and successful artillery bombardment of our soldiers' base on [the] borders of the Lugansk region from the Russian side. In other words, a knife in the back, cowardly and treacherous, knowing that we would not respond, destroying a host of lads and even more scorched vehicles. Most have developed psychological disorders, it was hell!<sup>64</sup>

Twenty-three Ukrainian soldiers were killed,<sup>65</sup> and almost 100 wounded in the attack. Google Earth satellite images taken on August 4, 2014, clearly show craters, wreckage, and scorched earth at the site of the Zelyonopolye camp. Incredibly, as open-source investigator Sean Case has pointed out, this same satellite imagery reveals more than 50 possible launch sites within Russia or just inside Ukrainian territory. Case has identified 122 possible artillery impact sites in Sector D, even calculating possible trajectories for the shelling based on the shape of craters visible on Google satellite images.<sup>66</sup> Bearing in mind that the firing and impact sites found on Google Earth may represent only a portion of the total number of actual attacks, the scale of the cross-border shelling last summer is

<sup>64</sup> "Ukraine Liveblog Day 514: Heavy Fighting in Gorlovka Area, Casualties Across Donetsk Region," *The Interpreter*, July 16, 2015, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-live-day-514-heavy-fighting-in-gorlovka-area-casualties-reported-across-donetsk-region/#9180>.

<sup>65</sup> *Ukrainska Pravda*, <http://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2014/07/11/7031672/>.

<sup>66</sup> Sean Case, "Smoking GRADs: Evidence of 90 Cross-Border Artillery Strikes from Russia to Ukraine in Summer 2014," *Map Investigations*, updated July 16, 2015, <http://mapinvestigation.blogspot.co.uk/>.

clearly immense.

This intervention would have a decisive effect on the course of the war. After 22 days of being pounded with artillery from all sides in the shrinking pocket of Sector D, Ukrainian forces were evacuated, fighting their way back to the west to link up with troops advancing from the strategic heights of Saur-Mogila on August 6,<sup>67</sup> suffering heavy losses along the way.

Over 100 kilometers of the border with Russia now lay outside Ukrainian control, allowing Russian forces to cross the frontier with neither resistance nor scrutiny.

## The T-72 Main Battle Tank in Separatist Hands

At the start of the ATO, the Ukrainian military made the decision to keep T-72 MBTs in reserve west of Kiev, near Lviv. Oleg Naumenko of Ukraine's presidential administration explained this decision to *The Interpreter*:

T-72 tanks were designed and are still produced by the state-owned UralVagonZavod located in Nizhny Tagil (Sverdlovsk Oblast, Russia). The T-72 and its modifications has been the most widely serially produced battle tank in the Soviet Union. It is worth mentioning that UralVagonZavod was included in the U.S. sanctions list as one of the key enterprises in Russia's military-industrial complex and due to explicit support of the company's top management of the Kremlin's expansionist policy in Ukraine.<sup>68</sup>

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukraine inherited around 1,000 T-72B tanks. However, the new government opted to use T-64 tanks as the main battle tank of the Ukrainian Army. There were several reasons for such a decision:

- Ukraine has a powerful Malyshev factory in Kharkiv that produces T-64s.
- Ukraine has a full-cycle production of T-64s [in place], producing bodies, gun turrets, cannons, transmissions, reactive armor and other elements of the tank.

- There are also powerful plants customized for repairing and modernizing precisely T-64s.

Meanwhile, T-72Bs were gradually replaced with other models. They were either transported to military preservation warehouses or reequipped to be exported elsewhere. Over the 23-year period of Ukrainian independence, most Ukrainian T-72 tanks were sold abroad. At the beginning of the Anti-Terrorist Operation in April 2014, Ukraine possessed between 200 and 300 T-72B tanks.

Naumenko's statement corresponds to observations by a number of reporters and military experts. An ARES report, published in November 2014,<sup>69</sup> notes that no Ukrainian T-72 was ever documented as having taken part in the ATO. In the last few months, however, the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) has noted the presence of T-72s in territory controlled by the Ukrainian government between Mariupol and Donetsk, widely considered to be a major front in the recent fighting.

Naumenko explains:

Due to intense military action in the east of the country, some of [the] T-72[s] were put back in service. We should bear in mind that the process of de-preservation takes a lot of time because it is necessary to conduct comprehensive repairs of works and stuff the tank with new weaponry to fit the ATO requirements. Currently, [the] Ukrainian armed forces and the National Guard of Ukraine have 50 T-72B tanks, which were transferred since late 2014. Nevertheless, [the] T-64 model and its modifications remain the core and the dominant tank in the Ukrainian Army. On the other hand, leaders of the so-called "DPR" and "LPR" reported of dozens, if not hundreds, of new T-72 battle tanks supplied by Russia. Their announcement that all tanks were seized from Ukrainian armed forces does not stand up to criticism. Firstly, there is no information about captured Ukrainian T-72s. Secondly, Russia-backed militants started to get new T-72s in the summer of 2014 when the Ukrainian Army did not have a single combat-ready T-72. Thirdly, the so-called "DPR" and "LPR" use Russian modernized versions—T-72 BM and T-72 B3—in service by the Russian Federa-

<sup>67</sup> "Ukraine Liveblog Day 172: Ukrainian Forces Break Out of Encirclement but Leave Border Vulnerable," *The Interpreter*, August 8, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-172-ukrainian-forces-break-out-of-encirclement-but-leave-border-vulnerable>.

<sup>68</sup> U.S. Department of Treasury. <http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/OFAC-Enforcement/Pages/20140716.aspx>.

<sup>69</sup> Ferguson and Jenzen-Jones, *Raising Red Flags*.

tion Armed Forces since 2012. Ukraine never purchased these modifications, nor do the Ukrainian armed forces operate such tanks.

These comments also match the assessment of many arms experts. As ARES noted, some of the T-72s spotted on Ukraine's battlefields—namely, the T-72B Model 1989 and the T-72B3—are not used by Ukraine and were never exported by the Russian military. Therefore, these vehicles can only have come from Russia—but not lawfully, as Russia does not export the T-72 Model 1989 to foreign countries. Moreover, as ARES noted:

The T-72BA and T-72B3 variants have also been employed by separatists, with the presence of the T-72B3 being particularly noteworthy. With Kontakt-5 ERA, an upgraded fire control system, a ballistic computer and a modern thermal sight, the T-72B3 represents the latest T-72 model in Russian service. It was introduced in 2013, and is not known to have been exported. One video uploaded by separatists shows a T-72B3 they claim to have captured after fighting with Ukrainian forces. Such an example may illustrate the frequency with which materiel appears to change between opposing sides within the conflict. Dr Igor Sutyagin, a senior research fellow at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), has also confirmed to us that neither the T-72BA or B3 are in service in the Ukrainian military.<sup>70</sup>

It is not clear when the first T-72s were obtained by the Russian-backed fighters. On July 31, T-72s of various models were spotted on flatbed trucks on the Russian border moving toward the Izvarino border crossing.<sup>71</sup> On August 18, the Vostok Battalion was documented as possessing a T-72 tank in Yasinovataya, north of Donetsk.<sup>72</sup> Ukrainian colonel Evgeniy Sidorenko, head of tank forces for Sector B of the South Operational Command of the ATO, says that the troops from the 8th Motor Rifle Brigade, 3rd Tank Company No. 54096, captured a T-72B3, a “red flag” weapon, in Ilovaik. He personally worked to repair

the tank in order to use it to flee from the Ilovaik cauldron, which caught so many Ukrainian soldiers in a death trap.<sup>73</sup>

However, one video uploaded on August 26, at the height of the “Russian Invasion,” discussed later, perhaps deserves the most attention. Released as journalists issued reports of Russian military convoys streaming across the border at the Izvarino crossing, this video showed a large and powerful convoy in Sverdlovsk, headed toward Lugansk. The convoy included:<sup>74</sup>

- Four amphibious auxiliary vehicles, two equipped with Zu-32-2 anti-aircraft guns
- Four T-72 battle tanks—three T-72B1s and one T-72BM or B3, the latter of which is exclusively used by the Russian military
- Three transports towing field artillery pieces, likely D-30 122-mm howitzers—ubiquitous weapons that have been spotted, with nearly exactly the same tarps, on both sides of the border<sup>75</sup>
- A 9K35 Strela-10 anti-aircraft missile system
- Two BMP-2 infantry fighting vehicles

This convoy is significant in many respects. First, while few T-72s had thus far been documented, four were spotted within the same convoy. Second, one of them was of a T-72 variant that could not have come from the Ukrainian military, with the only other supplier that makes any sense being Russian. Third, the inclusion of multiple types of vehicles, including anti-aircraft weapons, may indicate that this was a Russian military convoy specifically designed to protect itself from air strikes as it traveled to the frontlines. SAM systems are usually placed toward the front or rear of convoys, with a gap behind them to allow other vehicles to stay clear of missile exhaust. In this footage, a significant gap is notable between the Strela and the following BMP-2.

Soon afterward, the presence of the T-72 on the battlefields in eastern Ukraine became the norm, rather than the exception, as did sightings of the Strela-10,

<sup>70</sup> Ferguson and Jenzen-Jones, *Raising Red Flags*.

<sup>71</sup> “Ukraine Liveblog Day 164: Rada Rejects Yatsenyuk Resignation,” *The Interpreter*, July 31, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-164-rada-rejects-yatsenyuk-resignation/#3608>.

<sup>72</sup> “Ukraine Liveblog Day 182: Russian Aid to Enter Ukraine with Kiev’s Approval,” *The Interpreter*, August 18, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-182-russian-aid-to-enter-ukraine-with-kievs-approval/#3851>.

<sup>73</sup> “The Story of Colonel Evgeniy Sidorenko Who Broke Out from Ilovaik in a Russian T-72 Tank,” *BurkoNews*, September 14, 2014, <https://burkonews.info/story-colonel-evgeniy-sidorenko-broke-ilovaik-russian-t-72-tank/>.

<sup>74</sup> “Ukraine Liveblog Day 190: Russian Paratroopers Captured in Ukraine,” *The Interpreter*, August 26, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-190-russian-paratroopers-captured-in-ukraine/#3968>.

<sup>75</sup> “Ukraine Liveblog Day 182,” *The Interpreter*.



T-64s, and other Russian armored vehicles that were once rarely documented.

## Ukraine Advances in the West, Russia Attacks from the East

On July 27, Ukrainian forces made strategically significant gains, retaking Debaltsevo, a major rail hub in the east of the Donetsk region, and moving south into Shakhtyorsk, around 50 kilometers east of Donetsk. The capture of Debaltsevo seriously disrupted the steady stream of Russian armor, which had been moving into Donetsk from the border town of Krasnodon along the M-04 highway via Lugansk and Debaltsevo.

An alternative highway route<sup>76</sup> from Lugansk to Donetsk lay to the south, running via Krasny Luch and Shakhtyorsk. With Ukrainian troops poised to sever this supply line, all evidence suggests that Russia took decisive action, sending armored forces to prevent the fall of Shakhtyorsk. Video footage, shot that very same day, on July 27, shows a large mixed column, consisting of Strela-10 SAMs, BMP-2s, armored personnel carriers, artillery, and buses carrying troops, moving through Rovenki<sup>77</sup> and Krasny Luch.<sup>78</sup>

A video filmed by separatists the next day, July 28,<sup>79</sup> showed T-64 tanks and fighters going to battle in Shakhtyorsk. While most of the soldiers in this footage look like paramilitaries in ragtag uniforms, one soldier stands out. He is equipped with modern

combat gear very much akin to that worn by the “little green men” in Crimea. Furthermore, he is carrying what appears to be an ASVK anti-materiel rifle, a weapon that only entered Russian military service in 2013. The U.S. Department of Defense announced in a statement released on July 28<sup>80</sup> that a column of over 100 Russian military vehicles had been seen moving into Ukraine.

Russia’s military intervention in Shakhtyorsk succeeded in halting the Ukrainian advance, inflicting severe casualties. On the evening of July 31, at least 21 Ukrainian soldiers were killed and several captured in an ambush near the town.<sup>81</sup>

By August 2, it was clear that Ukrainian attempts to stop the movement of Russian forces toward Donetsk by the route south of Debaltsevo had failed, as a large column of tanks and artillery was filmed traveling<sup>82</sup> through the village of Nizhnaya Krynka, about 22 kilometers northwest of Shakhtyorsk.

Several days later, Ukrainian forces began an attempt to push into this belt of separatist-held territory from the other side, mounting an unsuccessful assault on the town of Ilovaisk, southwest of Shakhtyorsk. They would finally reach the center of this now-infamous settlement on August 19,<sup>83</sup> but in the intervening time, the landscape of the war zone had changed dramatically. While Ukraine had made significant gains, retaking suburbs<sup>84</sup> of both<sup>85</sup> separatist “capitals,” it had been forced to withdraw from Sector D on August 6, leaving a vast swathe of the border open to Russian invasion.<sup>86</sup>

<sup>76</sup> “Ukraine Liveblog Day 160: The Battle for the Donbass Intensifies,” *The Interpreter*, July 27, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-160-the-battle-for-the-donbass-intensifies/#3560>.

<sup>77</sup> Svobodny Donbass, “27.07.2014 Column of Russian Troops Moving Through the Town of Rovenki in the Lugansk Region. Ukraine War,” July 27, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VeWjViTVsTo>.

<sup>78</sup> Sergei Valovenko, “Lugansk Huge Column of Separatists Krasny Luch ATO LNR DNR 27.07.2014,” July 27, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=49c6loPhHns>.

<sup>79</sup> TomahawkVideo, “Donbass Militia in Battles for Shakhtyorsk,” July 27, 2014, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_5At0IAxNUw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_5At0IAxNUw).

<sup>80</sup> Jim Garamone, “Russian Troops, Equipment Mass Along Ukraine Border,” DoD News, July 28, 2014, <http://www.defense.gov/News/Article/602959>.

<sup>81</sup> “Ukraine Liveblog Day 165: 21 Ukrainian Soldiers Reported Dead in Ambush in Shakhtyorsk,” *The Interpreter*, August 1, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-165-21-ukrainian-soldiers-reported-dead-in-ambush-in-shakhtyorsk/>; “Ukraine Liveblog Day 164: Rada Rejects Yatsenyuk Resignation,” *The Interpreter*, July 31, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-164-rada-rejects-yatsenyuk-resignation/#3616>.

<sup>82</sup> “Ukraine Liveblog Day 166: Ukraine’s Borders Are Attacked Overnight,” *The Interpreter*, August 2, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-166-ukraines-borders-are-attacked-overnight/#3638>.

<sup>83</sup> “Ukraine Liveblog Day 183: Ukraine Fights to Retake Ilovaisk,” *The Interpreter*, August 19, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-183-ukraine-fights-to-retake-ilovaisk/#3858>.

<sup>84</sup> “Ukraine Liveblog Day 171: Barricades Burn Once Again as Authorities Try to Clear Maidan,” *The Interpreter*, August 7, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-171-barricades-burn-once-again-as-authorities-try-to-clear-maidan/#3689>.

<sup>85</sup> “Ukraine Liveblog Day 180: The Battle for Lugansk Begins,” *The Interpreter*, August 16, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-180-the-battle-for-lugansk-begins/#3831>.

<sup>86</sup> Pierre Vaux, “Ukrainian Troops Retreat from Russian Border, Leaving 100 Kilometers Open to Invasion,” *Daily Beast*, August 12, 2014, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/08/12/ukrainian-troops-retreat-from-russian-border-leaving-100-kilometers-defenseless-against-invasion.html>.



Separatist paramilitary police officers at the entrance to the town of Shakhtyorsk on July 28, 2014.  
Photo: Zurab Dzhavakhadze / TASS

On August 13, Chechen fighters, equipped with BTR-82A armored personnel carriers (which only entered Russian service in 2013 and have never, according to RUSI's military expert Igor, been in the Ukrainian arsenal), broke through Ukrainian lines near Snezhnoye, about 20 kilometers east of Shakhtyorsk.<sup>87</sup> With Russian troops now freely moving to the northwest, north, and east of Ilovaisk, Ukrainian fighters were entering a trap.

As Ukrainian troops, led by the Donbass volunteer battalion, raised their flag in the town center, they came under sustained fire from rocket artillery and mortars, killing one fighter—American Mark Palsawsky<sup>88</sup>—and wounding four, including the Donbass Battalion's commander, Semyon Semyonchenko.

The death toll grew the next day, as Ukraine reported enemy reinforcements entering the town from the north. Meanwhile, Russian-backed forces pressed against Ukrainian positions on Saur-Mogila to the east,<sup>89</sup> pouring in through the abandoned expanse of territory that had been Sector D. Colonel Evgeniy Sidorenko, a Ukrainian military officer who fought in

Ilovaisk, recounted later that the government forces lacked strength to defend their rear, with “nothing to cover the Starobeshevo-Kuteynikova area.”<sup>90</sup>

By August 24, Sidorenko said, troops in Ilovaisk had received reports that Russian-backed fighters were launching a major incursion. Although General Ruslan Homchak, who was commanding the Ukrainian operation in Ilovaisk, requested permission to withdraw, the General Staff instructed Ukrainian troops to remain in place. As pro-Russian forces moved in from the southeast, National Guard units defending Kuteynikova were forced to withdraw. At around 4 p.m. that afternoon, Sidorenko's reconnaissance group moved south along the road out of Ilovaisk toward Kuteynikova, where Ukrainian troops had previously fought off an attack. Judging by the vehicles Sidorenko claimed to have seen destroyed, which included a BMD, an infantry fighting vehicle used by Russian airborne forces, these soldiers were Russian paratroopers. Ten Russian paratroopers were in fact captured within 24 hours of this engagement, near Zerkalnoye, around 2 kilometers southwest of Kuteynikova and halfway

<sup>87</sup> “Ukraine Liveblog Day 180,” *The Interpreter*.

<sup>88</sup> “Ukraine Liveblog Day 183: Ukraine Fights to Retake Ilovaisk,” *The Interpreter*, August 19, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-183-ukraine-fights-to-retake-ilovaisk/#3873>.

<sup>89</sup> “Ukraine Liveblog Day 184: Fighting Continues in Ilovaisk and Lugansk,” *The Interpreter*, August 20, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-184-fighting-continues-in-ilovaisk-and-lugansk/#3879>.

<sup>90</sup> “Story of Colonel Evgeniy Sidorenko,” *BurkoNews*.

between Ilovaisk and the Russian border.<sup>91</sup>

These troops, from the 98th Airborne Division based in Kostroma, were exhibited by the Ukrainian government as proof of direct Russian military intervention in Ukraine. The Russian Ministry of Defense even admitted at the time that these men were active members of the Russian armed forces but claimed, incredibly, that they had become “lost” while patrolling the border and wandered accidentally into Ukraine.<sup>92</sup>

Sidorenko described another battle later on the night of August 24, during which a Russian T-72B3 was captured, as follows:

Later that night the serious fighting began. Our positions were fired on with heavy artillery. Our field shelters were reliable, but the heavy artillery with the help of [unmanned aerial vehicles] smashed these light fortifications. We suffered great losses in equipment and transport, and soldiers died. Nevertheless, our battle group with the help of a BMP disabled a Russian tank. I was not a participant in this fight, but I was immediately summoned to inspect the trophy. The tank crew left the vehicle and ran away together with other Russian armored vehicles.

I climbed into the tank and found that it [was] the latest modification of the Russian T-72B-3, which entered service in 2012. The main modification is the thermal sight “SOSNA-U” for the commander and the gunner. The sights on the tank were damaged by our fire, but after a small repair it was possible to use them, although the thermal sight and gun vertical stabilizer did not work. The rest of the tank was fully functional.

According to documents the tank belonged to the military section of the Russian Federation No. 54096—this is the 8th Motorized Rifle Brigade, 3rd Tank Company. The company commander was listed

as Rashitov A.R., and the tank commander as Sergeant Goncharov. I took the tank into service of our group, and personally drove it to our position.

We can confirm that Ukrainian troops in Ilovaisk captured a T-72B3 thanks to a photograph<sup>93</sup> taken during the battle for the town by Maks Levin of the Ukrainian news site *Levy Bereg*.<sup>94</sup>

The capture (and subsequent loss) of this tank, or a similar incident, would explain the origin of a T-72B3 that separatist fighters in Donetsk later proudly showed to a Russian state television crew.<sup>95</sup> The tank, which was described as a trophy taken in battle with the Ukrainians, bore the white stripes associated with government forces operating in the Donbass, just like the one photographed by Levin. As if to insinuate that Western states were backing the Ukrainian war effort, the separatists also took the cameramen inside the tank to show them the French-manufactured Thales Optronique sights, supplied to Russia and fitted to the T-72B3, which only entered Russian military service in 2013 as part of the SOSNA-U thermal imaging system described by Sidorenko. The T-72B3 has never been exported outside of Russia.

Back in Ilovaisk, the situation was about to deteriorate much further. On August 25, Ukrainian troops were forced to withdraw from Starobeshevo, around 23 kilometers southeast of Ilovaisk, allowing the Russians to encircle the town. After a battle outside the town, two officers from the 51st Brigade used grenades to blow themselves up, along with 12 Russian paratroopers, to avoid capture.<sup>96</sup> During another engagement that same day, Colonel Sidorenko claims to have encountered dead and wounded soldiers from Russia’s 31st Air Assault Brigade.

With Ukrainian forces surrounded in Ilovaisk, and Russian troops moving to link up with Donetsk from the southeast, Russia opened a new front, attacking the Ukrainian border town of Novoazovsk, on the Azov coast, about 70 kilometers south of Starobeshevo.<sup>97</sup>

<sup>91</sup> “Ukraine Liveblog Day 190,” *The Interpreter*.

<sup>92</sup> “Russian Servicemen Accidentally Cross Ukrainian Border,” *TASS*, August 26, 2014, <http://tass.ru/en/world/746663>.

<sup>93</sup> <http://i.lb.ua/024/19/5404c84f32948.jpeg>.

<sup>94</sup> Max Levin, “Ilovaisk: Chronicle of an Escape,” *LB.ua*, September 1, 2014, [http://society.lb.ua/life/2014/09/01/277952\\_ilovaysk\\_hronika\\_vtechi.html](http://society.lb.ua/life/2014/09/01/277952_ilovaysk_hronika_vtechi.html).

<sup>95</sup> “Ukraine Liveblog Day 211: Rada Ratifies Association Agreement and Passes Donbass Special Status Bill,” *The Interpreter*, September 16, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-211-rada-ratifies-association-agreement-and-passes-donbass-special-status-bill/#4270>.

<sup>96</sup> “Ukraine LiveBlog Day 193: Putin Appeals to ‘Militia of Novorossiia,’” *The Interpreter*, August 29, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-193-putin-appeals-to-militia-of-novorossiia/#4021>; Nolan Peterson, “How a Swedish Sniper Found Redemption in the Ukraine War,” *Daily Signal*, August 10, 2015, <http://dailysignal.com/2015/08/10/meet-the-former-neo-nazi-spokesman-who-now-fights-for-freedom-in-ukraine/>.

<sup>97</sup> “Ukrainian Liveblog Day 189: Is There a Russian Invasion?,” *The Interpreter*, August 25, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukrainian-liveblog-day-189-is-there-a-russian-invasion/#3934>.

That Russian forces, rather than the Kremlin's separatist proxies, launched the new offensive on the Azov Sea, is clear not only from the vast distance between this site and the remainder of the frontline—the attack came from across the border—but also from sightings of Russian personnel and military equipment in the Novoazovsk area.<sup>98</sup> By August 26, Ukrainian forces had pulled out of Novoazovsk, and Russian forces had established a foothold on the Azov coast.<sup>99</sup>

Russian troops began to spread southward from Ilovaik, with villagers in Kolosky, about 26 kilometers south of the besieged town, telling Reuters reporters that “little green men” akin to those seen in Crimea had arrived, along with 38 armored personnel carriers and other military vehicles.<sup>100</sup> Dmitry Chistyukhin, a resident of Kolosky, said that some of the men were trading their military-issued ready-to-eat meals (MRE) with villagers for homemade preserved fruits and vegetables. He said the writing on the ration packs was Russian, not Ukrainian, and added that the soldiers had painted over identifying marks on their military vehicles with white circles. Furthermore, he reported, when residents approached their checkpoint and asked if they were allowed to travel onto the next village, Komsomolske, the armed men asked, “Where’s that?”

“The people at the new checkpoint, they were polite military men wearing green,” he said. “Definitely not Ukrainian. They’re definitely not from around here.”

On the evening of August 26, Ukrainian forces engaged a column of what they claimed were Russian paratroopers moving on Ilovaik. Photos of the aftermath show dead soldiers, burnt out MT-LB armored personnel carriers, and one VSS Vintorez rifle, a weapon exclusively used by Russian *Spetsnaz* units.<sup>101</sup>

On the following morning, Semyon Semyonchenko, commander of the Donbass Battalion, warned that the situation in Ilovaik was critical, and that the General Staff needed to organize an evacuation as soon as possible. Instead, the Ukrainian command insisted that reinforcements had arrived and that the situation was under control. Semyonchenko dismissed this claim as

a lie.<sup>102</sup>

By this time, there were reports that Russian troops had entered Amvrosievka, on the highway between Ilovaik and the Avilo-Uspenka border crossing. Furthermore, the Ukrainian military claimed that a large column, of around 100 armored vehicles was moving south from Starobeshevo toward Telmanovo, a town around 37 kilometers to the south, to take control of the highway from Donetsk to Novoazovsk and connect the two fronts.<sup>103</sup>

By the evening of August 27, the official Twitter account of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine had sent a simple message—“#RussiaInvadedUkraine.” That same day a Russian independent news outlet ran the headline “From the Editors: Are We At War?” This period of time has now become popularly known as the “Russian Invasion,” the period when the Russian military most clearly intervened in eastern Ukraine.<sup>104</sup>

On August 28, with ammunition running low, Ukrainian troops began their first attempts to escape the encirclement, which by then had become known as the *kotel* (“kettle” or “boiler”). Colonel Sidorenko made it out that day in the captured T-72, accompanied by two columns of soldiers. Despite an agreement with the Russians to allow safe passage in exchange for the release of captives, the evacuating soldiers came under heavy fire, with many killed or wounded. After traveling south for about 22 kilometers, Sidorenko’s T-72 was knocked out, forcing the crew to move by foot through the sunflower fields overnight, covering 30 kilometers before reaching the Ukrainian lines.

The next day, another group of Ukrainian fighters from a National Guard unit, accompanied by a group of Ukrainian and German journalists, broke out of Ilovaik.<sup>105</sup> Footage of the escape, broadcast by Germany’s ARD television channel<sup>106</sup> shows the column coming under intense fire as it fled. Levin, the correspondent for Ukraine’s *Leviy Bereg*, reported that at least one Ukrainian tank had been knocked out and that he had been wounded when their car was shot up.

<sup>98</sup> “Ukraine Liveblog Day 199: NATO, Divided, Meets to Discuss Ukraine,” *The Interpreter*, September 4, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-199-nato-divided-meets-to-discuss-ukraine/#4128>.

<sup>99</sup> “Ukraine Liveblog Day 190,” *The Interpreter*.

<sup>100</sup> Maria Tsvetkova, “‘Men in Green’ Raise Suspicions of East Ukrainian Villagers,” Reuters, August 26, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/08/26/us-ukraine-crisis-fighters-idUSKBN0GQ1X520140826?irpc=932>.

<sup>101</sup> “Column of Russian Paratroopers on BMDs Smashed Outside Ilovaik,” August 27, 2014, <http://roadcontrol.org.ua/node/2297>.

<sup>102</sup> “Ukraine Liveblog Day 191: Fighting in Ilovaik, Amvrosievka and Novoazovsk,” *The Interpreter*, August 27, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-191-fighting-in-ilovaik-amvrosievka-and-novoazovsk/#3995>.

<sup>103</sup> “Ukraine Liveblog Day 191,” *The Interpreter*.

<sup>104</sup> “Ukraine Liveblog Day 191,” *The Interpreter*.

<sup>105</sup> “Ukraine Liveblog Day 193,” *The Interpreter*.

<sup>106</sup> Ukraine Heute, “Weltspiegel Extra: Murderous Ukraine War. Escape from Ilovaik,” September 3, 2014, [https://youtu.be/Yx\\_sWnP3\\_9g](https://youtu.be/Yx_sWnP3_9g).



On August 29, Putin made a public appeal to the “militia of Novorossiya,” to establish a humanitarian corridor, allowing Ukrainian troops to leave Ilovaisk safely.<sup>107</sup> The next day, despite Russian propaganda reports to the contrary,<sup>108</sup> Ukrainian soldiers, journalists, and military officials reported that there was no such corridor in effect, with reporter Ruslan Yarmolyuk of the 2+2 television channel, writing:

This morning in accordance with the agreement on the corridor which fighters were to open outside Ilovaisk, the remainders of the 40th battalion of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, the 39th, the 28th and the remnants of the 51st brigade of Vladimir-Volynskaya went into the corridor and were shelled by heavy artillery and mortars. The Russian beasts swept from the earth everything that went through the corridor, both vehicles and personnel of the Ukrainian army and part of the volunteer battalions. None of them have gotten in touch and have not reached the gathering place! From yesterday's reinforcement, which went to Ilovaisk, made up of 30 vehicles, not a single one got out; of 300 men, by preliminary information, no more than 10 remain alive! That's it, make your conclusions!<sup>109</sup>

Ukrainian volunteer fighters from the Crimea Battalion reported on Facebook “hundreds of bodies” and “dozens captured” in the “humanitarian corridor.” Their photos and videos from other breakout attempts capture the horror of the Ilovaisk encirclement, from which the last Ukrainian troops escaped on September 1.<sup>110</sup>

Reports from Novokaterinovka, a village just southeast of Starobeshevo on the road to Komsomolskoye, through which Ukrainian troops were forced to withdraw, described devastation on August 30. One resident told reporters from the Associated

Press] that the Ukrainian troops had been about to surrender when “they began to bomb them.” Photos from the scene show dozens of burnt-out vehicles and the body of a Ukrainian soldier hanging from a power line.<sup>111</sup>

Along with the testimony of Ukrainian soldiers and Russian prisoners, there is abundant photographic and video evidence that Russian forces were deployed to encircle Ilovaisk. At least five wrecked or abandoned T-72B3 or BA tanks have been documented at three different sites near Starobeshevo, including Novokaterinovka, where Ukrainian troops engaged them as they attempted to break out. As has also been noted previously, neither the T-72B3 nor the T-72BA have been used by the Ukrainian military in this conflict, and the T-72B3 was never exported by the Russian military.

Almost a year later, Anatoly Matios, Ukraine's chief military prosecutor, announced the final toll of the battle for Ilovaisk as 366 Ukrainian soldiers killed, and 429 wounded. Bodies would continue to turn up for months after the battle. Of the dead, 156 remain unidentified.<sup>112</sup> Furthermore, hundreds of Ukrainian soldiers were captured.<sup>113</sup> According to Matios, the ten Russian paratroopers who had been captured near Zerkalnoye were returned to Russia in exchange for the release of around 200 Ukrainian prisoners on August 30, 2014.<sup>114</sup> Other Ukrainian POWs were handed over to separatist fighters, who paraded, humiliated, and physically abused them on camera. A year later, on August 20, 2015, Matios said that 128 Ukrainian soldiers remained in captivity, while the fate of another 158 remains unknown.<sup>115</sup>

By September 2, the news that Russian-backed forces were in Telmanovo made it clear that Ukraine had lost control of the highway between Donetsk and Novoazovsk, despite having had some success in retaking Komsomolskoye on August 30.<sup>116</sup> Ukrainian troops had abandoned Komsomolskoye, locals told

<sup>107</sup> “Ukraine Liveblog Day 193,” *The Interpreter*.

<sup>108</sup> Novosti Rossii, “Humanitarian Corridor for the Donbass Battalion Ceases Effect in 2 Hours,” August 29, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jc6lhOPvG-o>.

<sup>109</sup> “Ukraine Liveblog Day 194: ‘Humanitarian Corridor’ Uncertain for Evacuation of Ukrainian Soldiers,” *The Interpreter*, August 30, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-194-humanitarian-corridor-uncertain-for-evacuation-of-ukrainian-soldiers/>.

<sup>110</sup> Action Tube, “Breakthrough of Convoy from Ilovaisk Boiler,” September 13, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=202FZNVn53I>.

<sup>111</sup> “Ukrainian Troops Routed as Russia Talks Tough,” Associated Press, September 2, 2014, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/ap/article-2740449/Ukrainian-troops-routed-Russia-talks-tough.html>.

<sup>112</sup> “Matios Unveiled the Full List of Those Killed around Ilovaisk,” Pravda, September 6, 2014, <http://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2015/08/20/7078407/>.

<sup>113</sup> “Ukraine Liveblog Day 194,” *The Interpreter*.

<sup>114</sup> “Ukraine Liveblog Day 194,” *The Interpreter*.

<sup>115</sup> “Ukrainian Prosecutor General's Office Has Published a List of Soldiers Who Died in the ‘Boiler of Ilovaisk,’” Novosti, August 20, 2015, <http://novosti.dn.ua/details/257940/>.

<sup>116</sup> “Ukraine Liveblog Day 197: Ukraine Reportedly Loses Control of Telmanovo, North of Mariupol,” *The Interpreter*, September 2, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-197-ukraine-reportedly-loses-control-of-telmanovo-north-of-mariupol/#4086>.

*Kommersant's* Ilya Barabanov, on the evening of September 1.

Ukraine had now lost control of the entire border between the Donetsk region and the Russian Federation.

## The Russian Invasion of Lugansk

The situation was little better in the Lugansk region. Ukrainian forces, aided by the natural barrier of the Seversky Donets River, maintained control of much of the north of the region, having retaken Severodonetsk on July 22.<sup>117</sup> As a result, the border to the north of the river remains under Ukrainian control to this day. However, direct Russian military intervention across the border, both via the Izvarino river crossing into the town of Krasnodon and across the vacuum created after the fall of Sector D, defeated Ukrainian forces to the south of Lugansk.

On July 9, days after Russian anti-aircraft systems had been filmed in the city of Lugansk, the Ukrainian military stronghold of Lugansk Airport, located around 15 kilometers south of the rebel-held regional capital, came under attack from Grad rockets and tanks. As at Donetsk Airport, the Ukrainian military was able to repel the attackers using airstrikes.<sup>118</sup>

While unable to stop the flow of troops and vehicles through the Izvarino crossing, only 40 kilometers from the airport, Ukrainian troops held onto their position and by August 14 were reported to be pushing separatist fighters back.<sup>119</sup> Two days later, Ukrainian forces entered the suburban Zhovtnevyi district of Lugansk.<sup>120</sup>

The Kremlin, unnerved by the possibility of Ukraine retaking Lugansk, decided to act much more decisively. On the evening of August 14, journalists from the *Guardian*, the *Daily Telegraph*, and the *New*

*Times* witnessed armored vehicles headed to the border. According to the *Guardian's* Shaun Walker, more than 20 armored personnel carriers crossed the border near the Russian town of Donetsk.<sup>121</sup> At the time, journalists from around the world had descended on the Izvarino border crossing, waiting to see whether Russia's first "humanitarian convoy" would cross the border. It seems that Russian forces, however, used a more discreet route in an attempt to avoid detection. As Walker wrote:

After pausing by the side of the road until nightfall, the convoy crossed into Ukrainian territory, using a rough dirt track and clearly crossing through a gap in a barbed wire fence that demarcates the border. Armed men were visible in the gloom by the border fence as the column moved into Ukraine. Kiev has lost control of its side of the border in this area.<sup>122</sup>

It soon became clear what the Russians were doing. On August 18, a military convoy made up of trucks, medical vehicles, artillery, and at least one BMD-2 infantry fighting vehicle was filmed moving west through the town of Sukhodolsk, just 10 kilometers from the Russian border. Having geolocated the convoy, it was easy to use a route-planning tool on Yandex Maps, a Russian competitor to Google, to work out that it was possible for the vehicles to have crossed the border at the village of Severny.<sup>123</sup>

This was not the first time convoys had been reported in Sukhodolsk: claims of Russian tanks on the streets of the town went as far back as July 12,<sup>124</sup> but the sighting of the BMD-2 was remarkable given that identical vehicles had been photographed 10 kilometers *inside* Russia on August 15, just three days before they were spotted in Sukhodolsk. These vehicles, used by Russian paratrooper units (VDV), had been photographed by journalists from the BBC, Reuters, and Germany's ARD at several locations as they ap-

<sup>117</sup> "Ukraine Liveblog Day 155: Train Carrying MH17 Bodies Arrives in Kharkiv," *The Interpreter*, July 22, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-155-train-carrying-mh17-bodies-arrives-in-kharkiv-and-black-boxes-handed-over/>.

<sup>118</sup> "Ukraine Liveblog Day 142: Ukraine Condemns Illegal Rendition of Captured Officer to Russia," *The Interpreter*, July 9, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-142-ukraine-condemns-illegal-rendition-of-captured-officer-to-russia/#3297>.

<sup>119</sup> "Border Guards Deny, but There Are Photos," *New Times*, August 15, 2014, <http://www.newtimes.ru/articles/detail/85685>.

<sup>120</sup> "Ukraine Liveblog Day 180: The Battle for Lugansk Begins," *The Interpreter*, August 16, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-180-the-battle-for-lugansk-begins/#3831>.

<sup>121</sup> Shaun Walker, "Aid Convoy Stops Short of Border as Russian Military Vehicles Enter Ukraine," *Guardian*, August 15, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/14/russian-military-vehicles-enter-ukraine-aid-convoy-stops-short-border>.

<sup>122</sup> Walker, "Aid Convoy Stops Short."

<sup>123</sup> "Ukraine Liveblog Day 182: Russian Aid to Enter Ukraine with Kiev's Approval," *The Interpreter*, August 18, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-182-russian-aid-to-enter-ukraine-with-kievs-approval/>.

<sup>124</sup> "Ukraine Liveblog Day 145: Russian Forces Penetrate Ukrainian Territory?," *The Interpreter*, July 12, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-145-russian-forces-penetrate-ukrainian-territory/#3321>.





Russian paratroopers wait with their BMD-2 infantry fighting vehicles at the entrance to the customs control zone, around 30 kilometers from the border with Ukraine. Note the triangular symbol and placement of the unit numbers.  
Photo: Pavel Golovkin / AP Photo

proached the border.<sup>125</sup> The placement of the vehicles' individual ID numbers and a triangular marking on the vehicle filmed in Sukhodolsk are identical to those on the BMD-2s photographed on the Russian side of the border.<sup>126</sup> RUSI's Sutyagin says that symbols such as the triangles seen on the BMD-2s are "tactical markings" unique to each Russian army brigade or independent regiment. A list assembled by Ukraine's InformNapalm suggests that this particular symbol belongs to the 331st Guards Airborne Regiment, of the 98th Guards Airborne Division.<sup>127</sup>

One BMD-2 was then captured by Ukrainian troops near Lutugino, to the west of Lugansk Airport, on

August 20.<sup>128</sup> The correlation between this vehicle and those photographed in Russia is striking. Once again, the camouflage pattern, triangular marking, and placement of the ID number, which has been covered or scratched over on the captured unit, is exactly the same as those of the vehicles photographed by Reuters. Documents found inside this BMD connected it to the First Paratrooper Company of the 76th Guards Air Assault Division from Pskov.

Russian artillery was now put to use against Ukrainian positions in Lugansk, firing both from within Russian territory, as reported by the Ukrainian military on August 11,<sup>129</sup> and from within, as demon-

<sup>125</sup> "Ukraine Liveblog Day 179: Russian Build-Up Continues at Border as Armour Enters Ukraine," *The Interpreter*, August 15, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-179-russian-build-up-continues-at-border-as-armour-enters-ukraine/#3808>; see also Birgit Virnich, Twitter, August 14, 2014, 11:46 p.m., <https://twitter.com/birgitvirnich/status/500171567754530816>.

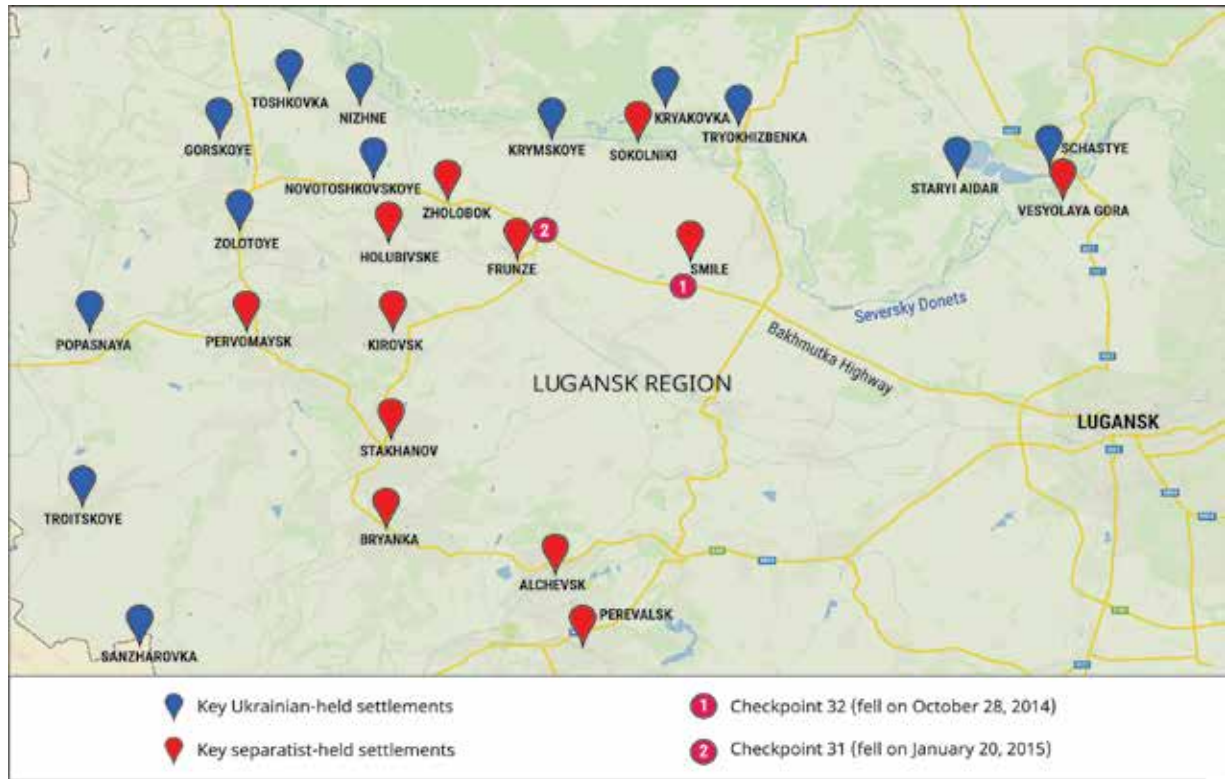
<sup>126</sup> "Russian Military Column Near the Ukrainian Border," *Postimees*, August 15, 2015, <http://www.postimees.ee/galerii/39477/venemilitaarkolonn-ukraina-piiri-lahistel>.

<sup>127</sup> InformNapalm, "The Tactical Signs of the Units of the Russian Armed Forces Which Have Been Deployed to Fight in Eastern Ukraine," <https://informnapalm.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/tactical-marking-ENGLISH-updated-13.01.15.pdf>.

<sup>128</sup> "Ukraine Liveblog Day 185: Russian Airborne Forces Reportedly Captured in Ukraine," *The Interpreter*, August 21, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-185-russian-airborne-forces-reportedly-captured-in-ukraine/#3889>.

<sup>129</sup> "Ukraine Liveblog Day 190," *The Interpreter*.

## Fighting along the Bakhmutka highway in the Lugansk region



strated by satellite photos released by NATO that show self-propelled guns moving near Krasnodon on August 21 and in firing positions nearby on August 23.<sup>130</sup>

As during the battle for Ilovaisk, modernized Russian tanks appeared in the Lugansk region. On August 26, a video was uploaded showing a column of tanks and anti-aircraft systems on the move in Sverdlovsk, southeast of Lugansk.<sup>131</sup> Three of the tanks on the video are T-72B1s, which were not in active Ukrainian service but have been in the Ukrainian arsenal. One, however, was identified as a T-72BM, another variant of the T-72, fitted with Kontakt-5 explosive reactive armor, that has not been exported outside Russia.<sup>132</sup>

By the end of August, Russian-backed forces were closing in around Lugansk Airport. On August 30, the Ukrainian military reported that government forces

had been pushed back from the village of Novosvetlovka, around 11 kilometers northeast of the airport.<sup>133</sup> Video footage shot after the battle shows extensive devastation and at least two T-72BA tanks,<sup>134</sup> one of which had been almost completely torn in two.<sup>135</sup>

The intensity of the fighting around the airport on the following day is made clear by Google Earth satellite images taken that day that show smoke billowing from dozens of burning fields surrounding the airfield, suggesting fires started from MLRS or artillery firing positions.

On September 1, Andriy Lysenko, then spokesman for the Ukrainian National Security and Defense Council, announced that Ukrainian troops had withdrawn from Lugansk Airport and the nearby village of Georgiyevka. Over the next few days, Ukrainian

<sup>130</sup> NATO Allied Command Operations, "New Satellite Imagery Exposes Russian Combat Troops Inside Ukraine," August 28, 2014, <http://aco.nato.int/new-satellite-imagery-exposes-russian-combat-troops-inside-ukraine.aspx#prettyPhoto>.

<sup>131</sup> "Ukraine Liveblog Day 190," *The Interpreter*.

<sup>132</sup> Jonathan Marcus, "Ukraine Crisis: T-72 Tank Shoots Hole in Russian Denial," BBC, August 28, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-28961080>.

<sup>133</sup> "Ukraine Liveblog Day 194," *The Interpreter*.

<sup>134</sup> "Novosvetlovka on the Day After Russian-Backed Forces Captured the Village," *The Interpreter*, August 27, 2015, 8:43, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H0uj7a3Vvcc>.

<sup>135</sup> "Destroyed T-72BA in Novosvetlovka—August, 2014," *The Interpreter*, August 27, 2015, 1:54, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s8t7duBI82g>.

troops were pushed back to the north of the regional capital, withdrawing from Zhovtnevyi and Metallist, a village just 1.5 kilometers north of the city.<sup>136</sup> Likely having achieved their military aims in the area, a large column, including T-72B3s, was filmed heading south, back toward the border crossing near Severny, on September 3.<sup>137</sup>

On September 4, as the cease-fire deal was being negotiated in Minsk, Marieluise Beck, a member of the Bundestag Committee on Foreign Affairs, visited parts of the Lugansk region still controlled by Kiev and was told by Dmitri Lugin, a Ukrainian official from the government of the Lugansk region “in exile,”<sup>138</sup> that a Russian military engineering brigade was at work building new power lines to cross the border (the nearest power station to Lugansk lies in Ukrainian-controlled Schastye). Ukraine had now lost control of the entire Lugansk region south of the Seversky Donets River, bar a handful of settlements toward the western end of the Bakhmutka highway and the town of Lysychansk.

Russian-backed forces have maintained almost daily shelling along the new frontier since the first Minsk agreement and have even continued to make territorial gains, pushing Ukrainian forces farther back along the highway in two offensives—one in October 2014,<sup>139</sup> and another in January of this year.<sup>140</sup> Ukrainian fighters reported in January that it was Russian regulars with tanks, rather than separatist paramilitaries, who had mounted the second offensive on the Ukrainian Checkpoint 31 and were now occupying the village of Zholobok.

Around the time of these forces’ gains, reporters from the Associated Press in Perevalsk saw large quantities of military hardware, including “15 pristine-looking tanks,” headed toward Checkpoint 31.<sup>141</sup> On September 7, 2014, a modernized T-72 model (either a BA or a B3) was filmed at a separatist parade

in Perevalsk, which lies only 25 kilometers from the Bakhmutka highway. There is some evidence that this convoy was “gifted” to Cossack fighters under the command of Nikolai (Mykola) Kozitsin.<sup>142</sup>

## Minsk Cease-fire Gives Way to the Second Battle for Donetsk Airport

After the Minsk Protocol was signed on September 5, battle on many fronts quickly died down, but the fighting did not stop. During this time the Russian-backed fighters moved to consolidate the battle lines, winning battles that were in progress when the cease-fire was signed.

For instance, on September 6, members of the pro-government Ukrainian Aidar Battalion claimed that they were ambushed near Metallist, north of Lugansk. Eleven Ukrainian soldiers were reportedly killed. That same day, video showed a large column of T-72BM tanks, Strela-10 mobile SAM launchers, and other armored vehicles moving on the Ukrainian side of the Russian border near Severny, a suspected Russian border crossing. It is unclear if the vehicles were returning to Russia or moving to reinforce separatist lines elsewhere in Lugansk, but the video is another clear sign of Russian military presence in the area.<sup>143</sup>

On September 8, however, it became clear that fighting north of Lugansk was not over. The Ukrainian military reported that its troops were surrounded near Slavyanoserbbsk, northwest of Lugansk, by what ATO spokesperson Andriy Lysenko said were “4 T-72 tanks, 2 BMDs, 2 BMPs, 4 BTRs and around 70 soldiers.” Video confirmed the presence of at least one T-72.<sup>144</sup>

The Ukrainian government continued to report cease-fire violations and the crossing of Russian ar-

<sup>136</sup> “Ukraine Liveblog Day 201: The Ceasefire Holds but Is It Temporary?,” *The Interpreter*, September 6, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-201/#4169>.

<sup>137</sup> Informatsiyno-Analitichnyi Tsent, “Column of Russian Federation Troops Outside Lugansk—Received 06.09.2014,” September 7, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qd90POOOC5g>.

<sup>138</sup> “Ukraine Liveblog Day 201,” *The Interpreter*.

<sup>139</sup> “Ukraine Liveblog Day 253: Ukrainian Forces Evacuated from 32nd Checkpoint Near Smile,” *The Interpreter*, October 28, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-253-ukrainian-forces-evacuated-from-32nd-checkpoint-near-smile/#4760>.

<sup>140</sup> “Ukraine Liveblog Day 337: Ukrainian Mobilisation Begins; Shelling in Donetsk, Avdeyevka, Schastye,” *The Interpreter*, January 20, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-live-day-337-first-wave-of-ukrainian-mobilisation-begins-as-shelling-pounds-donetsk-avdeyevka-and-schastye/#6368>.

<sup>141</sup> “Russia, Ukraine Agree Pullback Line for Heavy Arms,” Associated Press, January 21, 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/ap/article-2919642/Russian-FM-says-Ukraine-peace-talks-focus-frontline.html>.

<sup>142</sup> “Ukraine Liveblog Day 203: Poroshenko Heads to Mariupol,” *The Interpreter*, September 8, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-203-poroshenko-heads-to-mariupol/#4195>.

<sup>143</sup> “Ukraine Liveblog Day 201,” *The Interpreter*.

<sup>144</sup> “Ukraine Liveblog Day 203,” *The Interpreter*.

mor, tanks, and troops into eastern Ukraine throughout the fall, contrary to the belief that the Minsk cease-fire was holding.

In October, one of the most iconic fights of the conflict began—the second battle for Donetsk International Airport. Both a strategically and symbolically important location for the Russian-backed fighters, the airport is positioned on high ground on the northwest corner of Donetsk. Ukrainian artillery positioned in this area could easily target positions inside the city, while Russian-supplied artillery could target a number of Ukrainian military positions across the region. Furthermore, the Ukrainian military had dealt the Russian-backed fighters an embarrassingly one-sided defeat in May. Both sides, then, used the symbolism of the airport to serve their needs. As the battle wore on, the defenders and the attackers became legends to their respective supporters.

The battle for the airport took over four months. Mainly an artillery duel, Russian-backed fighters relentlessly pounded the position as Ukraine’s “Cyborgs” fought off round after round of attacks. The death toll continuously rose as the battle slowly escalated. Soon, the road in and out of the airport had become extremely dangerous, and it became very hard for Ukraine to run supplies or troops in or out of their positions. The Cyborgs were protected by Ukrainian artillery support, but since the Russian-backed fighters, led by the Vostok Battalion, were attacking from a city populated by civilians, not only were Ukrainian artillery strikes less effective, but artillery strikes by both sides caused civilian casualties.

Despite the Minsk agreement, by December the airport and the surrounding Ukrainian positions were under nearly constant attack. By the end of January, the Cyborgs had been overrun by Russian-backed fighters and were either killed, wounded, or captured, or else managed to escape.<sup>145</sup>

The battle was an important catalyst for the expansion of fighting across a broader front. During the battle, for instance, journalists spotted two new weapons systems near Donetsk: the 1RL232 “Leopard” and the 1RL239 “Lynx” ground-scan radar systems. These radar vehicles enable the tracking of vehicle movement beyond the line of sight and detect artillery that has been launched. Not only are these tools

important for seeing where the enemy is moving, but they help their users better target friendly artillery fire to knock out enemy positions. The Ukrainian military possesses a small number of Leopards, but they have never been documented near the frontlines, and there is no evidence that the Russian-backed fighters ever captured them. The Lynx was never in the possession of the Ukrainian military and so can only have come from Russia. Experts warned that the addition of these weapons would give the Russian-backed fighters a significant edge in the fighting.<sup>146</sup>

Also, as the battle for the airport escalated, fighting quickly spread beyond Donetsk as well. By January, heavy fighting was regularly reported across several fronts. These conflicts escalated after the fall of Donetsk Airport as Russian-backed fighters, supported by suspected Russian military units, pushed to capture even more territory.

## The Battle for Debaltsevo

The period of relatively low-intensity, localized violence that followed the first Minsk agreement came to an end with the final assault in January on Donetsk Airport, but it was during the battle for Debaltsevo that the role of the Russian armed forces was most transparent.

Tragically, many of the same circumstances seen in Ilovaisk were repeated in Debaltsevo: encirclement, government assurances of security, and fatal “humanitarian” corridors. But the military operation to take the town and its environs was conducted with the benefit of months of planning and separatist-controlled borders. The Ukrainian salient in Debaltsevo had been bombarded for months, but it was only in late January that the Kremlin committed to conquering the town.<sup>147</sup>

With the fall of Donetsk Airport on January 21, the “capital” of the so-called DNR was looking far more secure, and the offensive on Debaltsevo was a natural follow-up for the separatists in order to consolidate control and carve out a viable territory in the east. As discussed earlier, the Ukrainian liberation of Debaltsevo had severed the main supply line through Lugansk between Donetsk and the Russian border; the town is also a major rail hub. Despite a tentative agreement on artillery withdrawal following talks in Berlin, the

<sup>145</sup> James Miller and Pierre Vaux, “The Death of Ukraine’s Cyborg Army,” *Foreign Policy*, January 22, 2014, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/01/22/the-death-of-ukraines-cyborg-army-ukraine-russia-donetsk-airport-shelling/>.

<sup>146</sup> James Miller and Michael Weiss, “Putin Sends His ‘Leopard’ to the Battlefield of Eastern Ukraine,” *Foreign Policy*, November 13, 2014, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/11/13/putin-sends-his-leopard-to-the-battlefield-of-eastern-ukraine/>.

<sup>147</sup> Maxim Tucker, “Deadlier and Deadlier: Soldiers Cling to Strategic City,” *Kyiv Post*, January 23, 2015, <http://www.kyivpost.com/content/kyiv-post-plus/deadlier-deadlier-soldiers-cling-to-strategic-city-378172.html>.





*Remains of the Dolzhansky border checkpoint in the Lugansk region after it was attacked and seized by Russian-backed fighters.  
Photo: TASS*

town would have to fall to the separatists before the offensive could be brought to a halt.

There is evidence that Russian forces, even if in limited numbers, were already supporting a separatist offensive on Debaltsevo. In one video filmed by separatist fighters outside the town on January 23, a BPM-97 Vystrel armored command vehicle, a type of transport that has not been exported to Ukraine, can be seen traveling in a convoy with at least one Strela-10 mobile SAM system.<sup>148</sup> BPM-97s were also filmed on January 12 in Krasnodon,<sup>149</sup> traveling with at least one GAZ Vodnik armored infantry vehicle, which, as RUSI's Sutyagin has confirmed, is only used by the Russian armed forces. T-72B1 tanks seen in the Debaltsevo footage have had their ID numbers concealed

and bear white square insignia.<sup>150</sup> This emblem would be seen repeatedly on armor deployed during the battle for Debaltsevo and appears to have replaced the white circle seen on Russian military vehicles during the battle for Ilovaisk.

On January 24, Aleksandr Zakharchenko, the "prime minister" of the DNR, told a crowd that "God willing, in a few days we will seal the Debaltsevo *kotel*." Two days later, Russian-backed forces intensified their attacks on the area, shelling not only Debaltsevo itself but also Ukrainian positions both south and north of the town.<sup>151</sup> Viktor Kovalenko, an officer in Ukraine's 40th Infantry Battalion, said<sup>152</sup> that mobile communications in Debaltsevo began to go down in late January, especially after the 28th, when

<sup>148</sup> Bellingcat Vehicle Tracking System, "NAF Mechanized Battalion Combat Footage: Beginning of the Debaltsevo Offensive," February 10, 2015, 8:52, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fsFmdPSO2EU>.

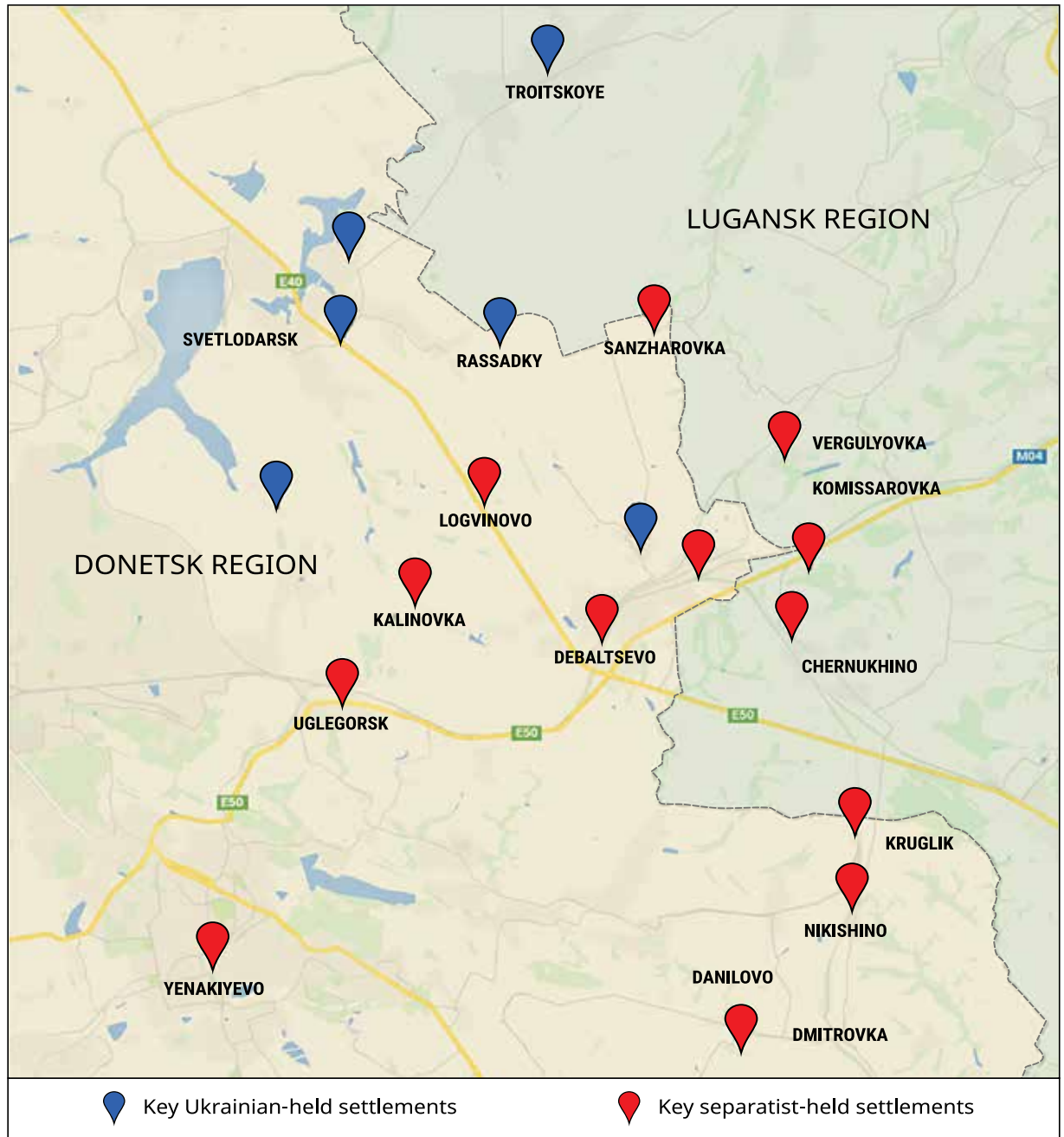
<sup>149</sup> "Ukraine Live Day 329: Fighting Continues to Intensify Ahead of Talks in Berlin Today," *The Interpreter*, January 12, 2015, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-live-day-329-fighting-continues-to-intensify-ahead-of-talks-in-berlin-today/#6168>.

<sup>150</sup> "Ukraine Live Day 354: Humanitarian Corridor Out of Debaltsevo Announced," *The Interpreter*, February 6, 2015, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-live-day-354-humanitarian-corridor-out-of-Debaltsevo-announced/#6718>.

<sup>151</sup> "Ukraine Live Day 344: Heavy Fighting Reported Outside Debaltsevo and Near Lugansk," *The Interpreter*, January 27, 2015, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-live-day-344-heavy-fighting-reported-outside-Debaltsevo-and-in-the-lugansk-region/#6537>.

<sup>152</sup> Viktor Kovalenko, "Debaltsevo Diary: Part 2. No Mobile Communications," *Diary of a Ukraine Journalist*, April 17, 2015, <https://viktorkovalenko.wordpress.com/2015/04/17/debaltsevo-diary-no-mobile-communications/>.

Russian-backed fighters close in around Debaltsevo



the battalion’s base in the town was attacked with heavy mortars and Grad rockets. Russian R-330Zh Zhitel jamming stations have been seen in Ukraine on several occasions, both in occupied Crimea<sup>153</sup> and in

the Donetsk region.<sup>154</sup> The Zhitel system not only jams mobile communications but also allows users to analyze mobile emissions in the area. Kovalenko reported that a balcony he stood on to send SMS messages was

<sup>153</sup> C. J. Chivers, “Is That an R-330Zh Zhitel on the Road in Crimea?,” *New York Times*, April 2, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/03/world/europe/instagram-catalogs-new-russian-weaponry.html>.

<sup>154</sup> OSCE, “Latest from OSCE Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) to Ukraine Based on Information Received as of 19:30 (Kyiv Time), 16 August 2015,” August 16, 2015, <http://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/177826>.



targeted with Grad rockets.

If mobile signals were used to pinpoint targets for Russian artillery, this was not a new approach. During Russia's wars in Chechnya, mobile communications were frequently intercepted and used to direct attacks. The most infamous example of this tactic was the assassination of Dzokhar Dudayev, the president of the breakaway Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, who was killed by missiles while making a call on a satellite phone in 1996. Journalist Robert Young Pelton reported that during the Second Chechen War, Grad rockets were fired at locations used for making mobile calls within minutes of the caller hanging up.<sup>155</sup>

Mobile communications in Debaltsevo were also hijacked by Russian forces in the area and used to conduct psychological warfare. Kovalenko wrote:

Indeed, the terrorists had been taking control of our cell phones for up to 5–10 minutes, in order to deliver their propaganda messages. Sure, the SMS texts were anonymous and false. And not one of us fled, not one of us left our positions. Many times our unit commanders banned the use of cell phones in the battle zone, but our servicemen's wish to reach relatives was so strong that they often ignored the ban and tried to catch any signal as best they could.<sup>156</sup>

One blanket text message, reported by freelance journalist Oliver Carroll, read: "Guys I've surrendered, they don't shoot prisoners. Better than dying."<sup>157</sup>

By January 29, with incessant shelling and Russian-backed fighters closing in from the east and south, the evacuation of civilians began. Reporter David Patrikarakos said at the time that shelling was so intense that it was "basically a constant noise."<sup>158</sup>

The Debaltsevo *kotel* now began to contract. On January 30, Russian-backed forces entered the town of Uglegorsk, around 10 kilometers west of Debaltsevo.<sup>159</sup> The next day they took Nikishino, to the southeast.<sup>160</sup> Graphic footage released on February 3 revealed that Russian-backed forces had wiped out a Ukrainian checkpoint in the village of Chernukhino, just outside Debaltsevo.<sup>161</sup> The video also made it clear that Russian-backed fighters, equipped with tanks, were now based on a farm on the eastern edge of the town.

By February 9, fighting had been reported near the village of Logvinovo, on the highway between Debaltsevo and Artyomovsk.<sup>162</sup> This link with the remainder of the Ukrainian front was essential for resupplying forces in the salient. According to Ukrainian journalists, Russian-backed forces had taken control of the railway switching yard on the eastern outskirts of Debaltsevo. Meanwhile, the separatists were boasting of victories in Kalinovka, to the west of the town, and Redkodub, to the southeast.

On this same day, three Ukrainian journalists described reports from soldiers on the front that Russian Su-25 jets had conducted air strikes near Novogrigoryevka, a Ukrainian stronghold just north of the town. The Ukrainian military declined to confirm these reports at the time.<sup>163</sup> While this was not the first report of Russian air attacks on Ukrainian territory, it was the first to be corroborated by multiple sources.

It became clear the next day that Logvinovo had fallen and that the highway link to Artyomovsk had been severed.<sup>164</sup> The only remaining passable routes between Debaltsevo and the rest of the Ukrainian frontlines were narrow country roads vulnerable to ambush and shelling.

Ukrainian troops managed to hold out in Debaltsevo for seven more days as the Russian-backed forces tightened their encirclement, killing 19 soldiers in just

<sup>155</sup> Robert Young Pelton, "Kill the Messenger," *Foreign Policy*, March 3, 2012, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/03/03/kill-the-messenger/>.

<sup>156</sup> Kovalenko, "Debaltsevo Diary."

<sup>157</sup> Oliver Carroll, Twitter feed, February 13, 2015, 3:01 p.m., <https://twitter.com/olliecarroll/status/566371566909685763>.

<sup>158</sup> "Ukraine Live Day 346: Russian-Backed Forces Fight to Encircle Debaltsevo," *The Interpreter*, January 29, 2015, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-live-day-346-russian-backed-forces-fight-to-encircle-Debaltsevo/#6576>.

<sup>159</sup> "Ukraine Live Day 347: At Least 11 Dead in Shelling Attacks," *The Interpreter*, January 30, 2015, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-live-day-347-at-least-seven-dead-in-shelling-attacks/#6588>.

<sup>160</sup> "Ukraine Live Day 349: More Russian-Backed Separatist Victories Near Debaltsevo," *The Interpreter*, February 1, 2015, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-live-day-349/#6621>.

<sup>161</sup> "Ukraine Live Day 352: Shell Strikes Hospital in Donetsk," *The Interpreter*, February 4, 2015, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-live-day-352-shell-strikes-hospital-in-donetsk/#6675>.

<sup>162</sup> "Ukraine Live Day 357: Huge Blast in Donetsk Last Night," *The Interpreter*, February 9, 2015, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-live-day-357-huge-blast-in-donetsk-last-night/#6749>.

<sup>163</sup> "Ukraine Live Day 357," *The Interpreter*.

<sup>164</sup> "Ukraine Live Day 358: Debaltsevo Cut Off from Highway," *The Interpreter*, February 10, 2015, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-live-day-358-Debaltsevo-cut-off-from-highway/#6760>.

one battle to take the heights of Gostra Mogila, to the south of the town on February 11,<sup>165</sup> the same day the second Minsk agreement was signed. Regardless of that agreement, Russian attacks on Debaltsevo continued even after February 15, the date on which the cease-fire was to have come into effect.

By February 17, Russian-backed forces had begun entering Debaltsevo, with Ukrainian troops reported to be running low on ammunition as the fighting reached a crescendo.<sup>166</sup> Kovalenko wrote that at one of the 40th Battalion's strongholds, 92 Ukrainian soldiers were encircled and forced to surrender.<sup>167</sup>

Late that night, the decision was finally made to evacuate. Despite assurances that Ukrainian forces would be allowed to leave safely, the retreating convoys came under fire from Grad rockets and heavy artillery.<sup>168</sup> The situation was further compounded by the fact that the encircled forces did not have enough operable vehicles left to carry all of their personnel in a single trip. Armored columns therefore had to shuttle back and forth between Artyomovsk and Debaltsevo on February 18, suffering heavy casualties under the hail of fire.<sup>169</sup>

On March 11, President Poroshenko announced that 66 Ukrainian soldiers had been killed and over 300 wounded.<sup>170</sup> Meanwhile, Eduard Basurin, a separatist military spokesman, claimed that around 3,000 Ukrainian servicemen had died in the battle.<sup>171</sup> A report by the UN Office for the Coordination of

Humanitarian Affairs dated February 27 stated that “approximately 500, mostly civilian, corpses had been found in houses and cellars in Debaltsevo.”<sup>172</sup>

Physical evidence of Russia's military presence abounds from this period. T-72BA and B3 tanks were clearly deployed in considerable numbers. In one video recorded near Debaltsevo on February 15 by Graham Phillips, an infamous British propagandist for the separatists, a whole column of T-72B3s can be seen in clear detail.<sup>173</sup> In a separate case, two T-72BMs were recorded by freelance photographer Max Avdeev during the closing section of the battle, near Logvinovo.<sup>174</sup> And after the occupation of Ulegorsk, video emerged of a BMP-2 bearing the exact same hand-painted slogan as had been seen on a flatbed in the Russian border town of Kamensk Shakhtinsky in August 2014.<sup>175</sup>

One of the most compelling pieces of evidence was testimony from Dorzhi Batomunkuyev, a Russian-Buryat tank gunner who was wounded during the battle and later spoke to *Novaya Gazeta's* Yelena Kostyuchenko.<sup>176</sup> Batomunkuyev, a contract soldier serving in the 5th Independent Tank Brigade, based in Ulan-Ude, said that he had crossed the border with his unit on February 8, traveling to Donetsk. Batomunkuyev's unit, consisting of around 300 personnel with 30 tanks, nine BMP-2s, three armored medical vehicles, and 15 trucks, had painted over their tanks, obscuring all numbers and insignia, before departing

<sup>165</sup> “Ukraine Live Day 359: ‘Last-Chance’ Peace Talks with Dozens of Civilians and Soldiers Killed,” *The Interpreter*, February 11, 2015, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-live-day-359-last-chance-peace-talks-with-dozens-of-civilians-and-soldiers-killed/#6779>.

<sup>166</sup> “Ukraine Live Day 365: Russian-Backed Forces Entering Debaltsevo,” *The Interpreter*, February 17, 2015, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-live-day-365-russian-backed-forces-entering-Debaltsevo/#6862>.

<sup>167</sup> Victor Kovalenko, “Debaltsevo Diary. Part 10. The Start of Our Withdrawal,” *Diary of a Ukraine Journalist*, May 10, 2015, <https://viktorkovalenko.wordpress.com/2015/05/10/debaltsevo-diary-part-10-the-start-of-our-withdrawal/>.

<sup>168</sup> “Rebels Offer Corridor for Ukraine Troops Out of Key Town—Interfax,” Reuters, February 16, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/02/16/ukraine-crisis-corridor-idUSL5N0VQ2EP20150216>.

<sup>169</sup> “Ukraine Live Day 366: Ukrainian Journalist Reports Retreat from Debaltsevo,” *The Interpreter*, February 18, 2015, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-live-day-366-ukrainian-journalist-reports-retreat-from-Debaltsevo/>.

<sup>170</sup> “Debaltsevo Ukraine Has Lost 66 Soldiers, More Than 300 Injured—Poroshenko,” *Unian*, March 11, 2015, <http://www.unian.net/politics/1054067-ukraina-v-Debaltsevo-poteryala-66-boytsov-bolee-300-poluchili-raneniya-poroshenko.html>.

<sup>171</sup> “DNR Defense Ministry: The General Staff of Ukraine Is Trying to Hide Real Losses in the Battles of Debaltsevo,” TASS, August 8, 2014, <http://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/2174570>.

<sup>172</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, “Ukraine Situation Report No. 29,” February 27, 2015, [http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Sitrep%20%2329%20FINAL\\_1.pdf](http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Sitrep%20%2329%20FINAL_1.pdf).

<sup>173</sup> “Ukraine Live Day 363: Ukrainian Commander Reports Ultimatum from Russian-Backed Separatists,” *The Interpreter*, February 15, 2015, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-live-day-363-ukrainian-commander-reports-ultimatum-from-russian-backed-separatists/#6845>.

<sup>174</sup> Max Avdeev and Max Seddon, “Horrific Images Capture the Sheer Brutality of War in Ukraine,” *Buzzfeed*, February 17, 2015, [http://www.buzzfeed.com/avdeev/horrific-images-capture-the-sheer-brutality-of-ukraine-war?fb\\_comment\\_id=fbc\\_659909300786917\\_659990737445440\\_659990737445440#haoWyWd93](http://www.buzzfeed.com/avdeev/horrific-images-capture-the-sheer-brutality-of-ukraine-war?fb_comment_id=fbc_659909300786917_659990737445440_659990737445440#haoWyWd93).

<sup>175</sup> “Ukraine Live Day 355: Poroshenko Urges Rapid Ceasefire at Munich Security Council,” *The Interpreter*, February 7, 2015, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-live-day-355-poroshenko-urges-rapid-ceasefire-at-munich-security-council/#6724>.

<sup>176</sup> “Ukraine Live Day 378: Severely Injured Russian Soldier Describes Deployment to Ukraine,” *The Interpreter*, March 2, 2015, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-live-day-378-severely-injured-russian-soldier-describes-deployment-to-ukraine/#7227>.

for Ukraine. It is noteworthy that the Associated Press' Peter Leonard reported encountering another soldier from Russia's far east—Yakutia—manning a T-72B1 in Uglegorsk on February 18.<sup>177</sup> On one of the last days of the battle, while defending Logvinovo from a Ukrainian counterattack, Batomunkuyev's T-72B was struck by a Ukrainian tank shell, igniting onboard ammunition and severely burning him. We shall discuss Batomunkuyev's story and its significance in more detail later in this report.

## The Southern Front: The Summer of 2015

Since the fall of Debaltsevo, the separatist-held territories of the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics have existed in a relatively stable geographic form. Two natural barriers roughly define the frontier in both regions: the Severskyi Donets River to the north of Lugansk, and the river Kalmius to the south of Donetsk. Lines of communication between separatist-held cities are now complete and safe from Ukrainian attack. Skirmishes and attempts to break through the lines have continued along the frontline, especially in the stretch that lacks such barriers, from the village of Krymskoye in the Lugansk region to the town of Dokuchaevsk outside Donetsk.

While there have been daily attacks along the lines, these appear, for the most part, to be aimed either at harassing, demoralizing, and weakening Ukrainian forces by attrition, or at flattening out certain sections of the frontline near separatist-held population centers. At first glance, this would suggest that the war is headed toward a "frozen" conflict, with exchanges of fire along the frontier but no major movement to come. However, the escalation in fighting over the past summer, which peaked in August with the daily use of Grad rockets and mounting military and civilian casualties, suggests otherwise. Where, then, is the next Russian-backed offensive likely to take place?

Looking along the demarcation line, there are

several areas where relatively small-scale advances may be desirable to the Russians and separatists. In the north of the combat zone there are several regions where Russian-backed forces could be deployed to push the Ukrainians back. These include the slim strip of Ukrainian-held territory along the southern banks of the Severskyi Donets, toward the Bakhmutka highway; territory on either side of the separatist-held town of Gorlovka; and the Ukrainian positions on the northern and western fringes of Donetsk.

However, expanding into the main swathe of land behind this section of the front, stretching between the Ukrainian settlements of Lysychansk to the east and Konstantinovka to the west, would leave Russian-backed forces exposed to flanking attacks and the possibility of fighting an enemy with the advantage of intact supply lines and far greater strategic depth. Attacks along the north of the frontier are therefore likely to be limited in their aims.

The ultimate target lies to the south—Mariupol. The city is a prize of unparalleled economic, military, and symbolic worth. With its port—the only one in the whole of Donbass—and huge steelworks, Mariupol accounted for 31–33 percent of the Donetsk region's total industrial output in 2013.<sup>178</sup> The steel industry is at the core of the Donbass's economy, and Mariupol alone made up more than 70 percent of total steel production in that year. Additionally, 200 kilometers to the west lies the border with occupied Crimea. The land between the two is sparsely populated, with only two significant population centers. Mariupol is therefore the greatest obstacle to the achievement of a contiguous Russian-controlled territory stretching from the border of the Rostov region to Crimea.

Finally, the symbolic value of Mariupol derives partly from it having been taken over by separatist militants for just over a month last summer. The city was only brought back under government control after two assaults.<sup>179</sup> After the Ukrainian government liberated the city, it became the administrative center of the Donetsk region, standing in for separatist-held Donetsk.<sup>180</sup>

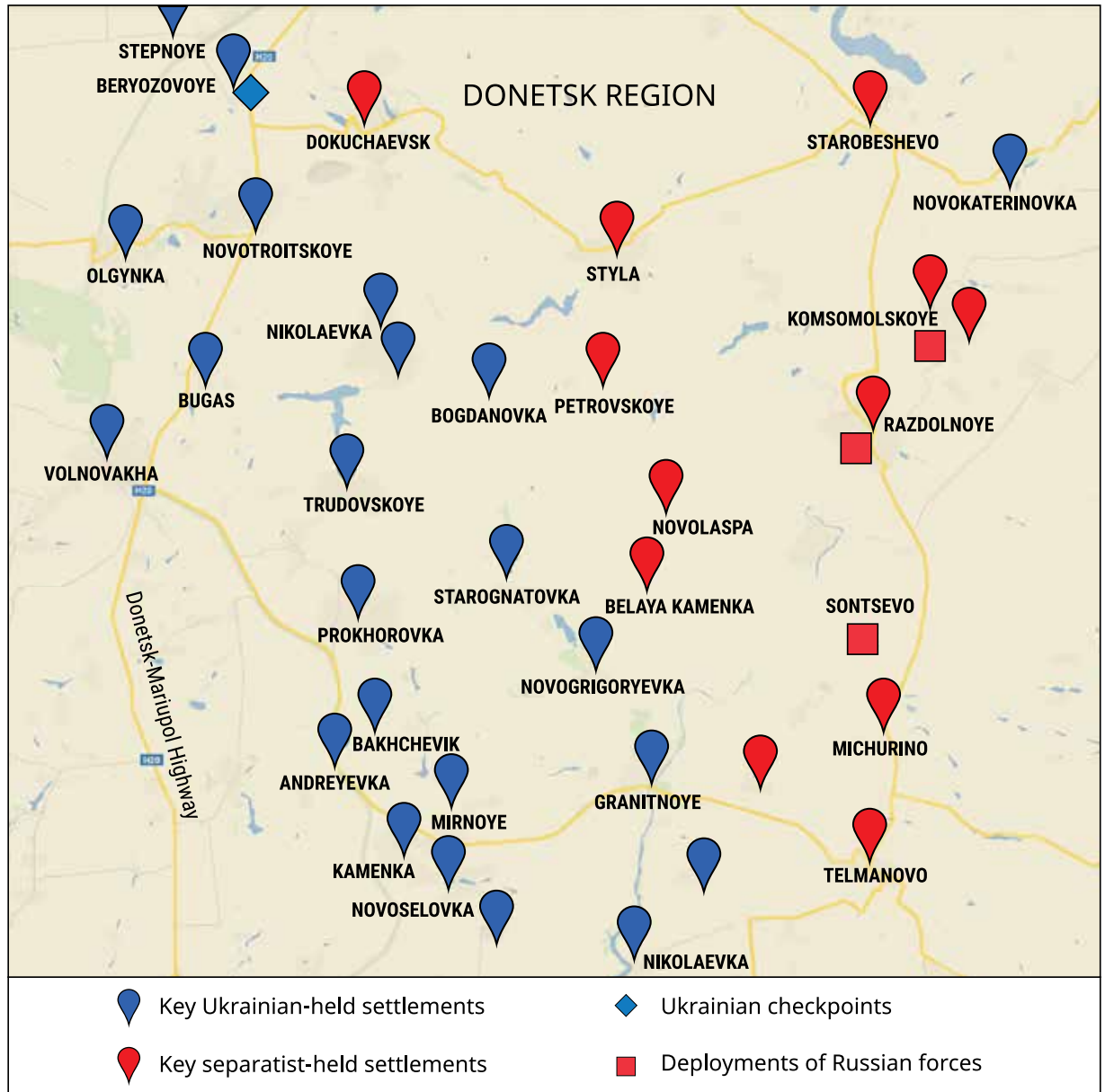
<sup>177</sup> Peter Leonard, Twitter feed, February 18, 2015, 5:01 a.m., [https://twitter.com/Peter\\_\\_Leonard/status/568032612645773312](https://twitter.com/Peter__Leonard/status/568032612645773312).

<sup>178</sup> "Ukraine Liveblog Day 221: Russia Threatens to Cut Gas Supplies While Buffer Zone Group Meets," *The Interpreter*, September 26, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-221-russia-threatens-to-cut-gas-supplies-while-buffer-zone-group-meets/#4427>.

<sup>179</sup> "Ukraine Liveblog Day 79: Mariupol City Council Building Back in Separatist Hands," *The Interpreter*, May 7, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-79-mariupol-city-council-building-back-in-separatist-hands/#2677>; "Ukraine Liveblog Day 116: Major Government Operation in Mariupol," *The Interpreter*, June 13, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-116-major-government-operation-in-mariupol/#3065>.

<sup>180</sup> "Mariupol has become the temporary capital of the Donbass," *Zerkalo Nedeli*, June 13, 2014, <http://gazeta.zn.ua/internal/mariupol-stal-vremennoy-stolicey-donbassa-.html>.

Front line along the river Kalmius south of Donetsk



While Russian-backed forces after months of fighting lie only around 13 kilometers to the east of Mariupol, an all-out assault from this direction alone would almost certainly fail. Ukrainian forces have had almost a year to fortify their positions and can be resupplied from both the north and the west. Any feasible operation to take Mariupol would require a pincer move to the north in order to push Ukrainian troops off the highway leading up to Donetsk. The main population center on this highway is the town of Volnovakha, around 45 kilometers outside Mariupol. To the north of Volnovakha, Russian-backed

forces occupy a short section of the highway between Donetsk and Dokuchaevsk. To the east, they hold positions on the far bank of the Kalmius. Between the river and the highway lies around 30 kilometers of largely empty, rolling hills.

Since the spring of this year, the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine (SMM) has reported large quantities of armor in separatist-held territory to the east of the Kalmius on a weekly, if not daily basis (see Appendix). The greatest concentrations have been seen around the settlements of Komsomolskoye, Razdolnoye, Sontsevo, and Michurino. Significant

quantities of military vehicles have also been observed on the Azov coast, east of Mariupol. Military hardware reported includes not only tanks and armored personnel carriers, but also surface-to-air missile systems, artillery, and electronic warfare equipment.

On July 4, the SMM made two particularly noteworthy discoveries, the first being two pontoon bridge layers near Komsomolskoye.<sup>181</sup> This equipment could well be used to ford the Kalmius in the event of an offensive. The second, from the same area, was a 2S4 Tyulpan 240-millimeter mortar system. This weapon is not used by Ukraine.

The SMM drones that have been conducting these observations have frequently been subjected to jamming, leading to the loss of one UAV on July 22.<sup>182</sup> In one incident on May 28, the SMM appears to have encountered Russian military personnel in the town of Petrovskoye (Petrivske in Ukrainian):

In Petrivske (“[DNR]”-controlled, 38km south-east of Donetsk) the SMM spoke to a young man who said that the former local holiday camp was currently occupied by an unknown armed group. He could not specify for how long this armed group had been stationed in the village. In the village the SMM spoke to two women, both wearing military uniforms, with caps with Russian Federation Armed Forces insignia. They said that they were from Kramatorsk. During the conversation with the two women a vehicle with Russian Federation number plates stopped next to the OSCE vehicles and two armed men, similarly dressed, exited the car and ordered the women to stop the conversation with the SMM. Behind a tall fence inside the holiday camp, the SMM observed one infantry fighting vehicle.<sup>183</sup>

Evidence of a large-scale deployment to the Kalmius front comes not only from the OSCE, but also from surveillance conducted by Ukrainian fighters

and social media postings by Russian-backed fighters themselves. By June, *The Interpreter* was able to establish, using social media evidence, that an agricultural college in Razdolnoye had been converted into a military training site, hosting tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, and at least one reconnaissance and assault group.<sup>184</sup> At the end of June, the Ukrainian Dnipro-1 Volunteer Battalion released their own drone footage of a site south of Sontsevo, taken on two dates: May 20 and June 4.<sup>185</sup> The first recording shows around 70 soldiers, at least two T-72 tanks, and several pieces of engineering equipment in the woods around 12 kilometers from the nearest Ukrainian-held settlement, Granitnoye. The second, from June 4, shows that the site had been transformed. What had just been a number of dirt tracks and a tent among the trees was now a full-fledged military base. Visible on the video are paved roads, complete with reflective stakes for moving vehicles at night; a parade square; fortified emplacements for parking fuel tankers; and several large tents. At least nine T-72s, a communications vehicle, and an antitank gun can be seen. Furthermore, the continued presence of engineering vehicles suggests that the camp may have grown in size since the May footage. Igor Sutyagin at RUSI says that construction of the camp indicates that it has been built by professional military engineers according to traditional Soviet-era designs. The use of reinforced defensive positions, such as those used to shield fuel tankers, is typical of forward operating bases used by former Soviet armies.

On June 3, 2015, Russian-backed forces carried out a major assault<sup>186</sup> on the Ukrainian-held Marinka suburb of Donetsk. This was the biggest attack to have taken place since the fall of Debaltsevo, but the assault, and several subsequent smaller attacks, failed.<sup>187</sup> This attack appears to be connected to the Kalmius theater of operations, as pushing Ukrainian troops away from Marinka would put distance between the

<sup>181</sup> OSCE, “Latest from OSCE Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) to Ukraine Based on Information Received as of 19:30 (Kyiv Time), 5 July 2015,” July 6, 2015, <http://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/170456>.

<sup>182</sup> OSCE, “Latest from OSCE Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) to Ukraine Based on Information Received as of 19:30 (Kyiv Time), 22 July 2015,” July 23, 2015, <http://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/174226>.

<sup>183</sup> OSCE, “Latest from OSCE Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) to Ukraine Based on Information Received as of 19:30 (Kyiv Time), 28 May 2015,” <http://us6.campaign-archive1.com/?u=b11aceda364f8f9afa6cadbbb&id=c7664ef430&e=3612d1ad47>.

<sup>184</sup> “Meet the Russian Fighters Building a Base Between Mariupol and Donetsk,” *The Interpreter*, June 17, 2015, <http://www.interpretermag.com/meet-the-russian-fighters-building-a-base-between-mariupol-and-donetsk/>.

<sup>185</sup> Pierre Vaux, “Drones Find Russian Base Inside Ukraine,” *Daily Beast*, June 30, 2015, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/06/30/apparent-russian-base-found-in-ukraine.html>.

<sup>186</sup> “Ukraine Live Day 471: Russian-Backed Forces Launch Major Assault Near Donetsk,” *The Interpreter*, July 3, 2015, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-live-day-471-russian-backed-forces-launch-major-assaults-north-and-south-west-of-donetsk/>.

<sup>187</sup> “Ukraine Live Day 476: Marinka Assaulted This Morning, Ukraine Says Attack Was Repelled,” *The Interpreter*, June 8, 2015, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-live-day-476-marinka-assaulted-this-morning-ukraine-says-attack-was-repelled/#8732>.



main Ukrainian body of troops on the Zaporozhye–Donetsk highway and those to the south on the highway to Mariupol. As further evidence of this intent, the northernmost Ukrainian positions on the Donetsk–Mariupol highway, near Beryozovoye and Taramchuk, were attacked that same morning.

In August, the Kalmius front finally exploded. On the morning of August 10, following intense Grad and artillery shelling along the northern section of the front between Nikolaevka and Bogdanovka, Russian-backed forces assaulted Ukrainian positions near the village of Starognatovka.<sup>188</sup> Ukrainian reports say that around 400 fighters took part in the assault, supported by 10 tanks and 10 BMPs. However, after several hours of “practically hand-to-hand” fighting,<sup>189</sup>

Ukrainian troops succeeded in repelling the enemy and went on the counteroffensive, advancing as far as the separatist-held village of Novolaspa before withdrawing back to their side of the demarcation line.<sup>190</sup>

The next two weeks saw intense fighting across the entire frontier, with daily use of MLRS and heavy artillery. The announcement of a cease-fire deal at the end of August brought relative calm to most of the frontline.<sup>191</sup> However on September 9, with sporadic attacks and shelling continuing, Oleksandr Turchynov, secretary of the Ukrainian National Security and Defense Council, claimed that Russia was continuing to concentrate forces behind the frontline in preparation for a possible offensive.<sup>192</sup>

<sup>188</sup> Pierre Vaux, “Ukraine’s Cold War Gets Hot as Combat Explodes in the Last 24 Hours,” *Daily Beast*, August 12, 2015, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/08/12/ukraine-s-cold-war-gets-hot-as-combat-explodes-in-the-last-24-hours.html>.

<sup>189</sup> Andriy Tsaplienko, Facebook Timeline photo, August 9, 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10153248401304690&set=a.10150158904529690.302395.583064689&type=1>.

<sup>190</sup> “Ukraine Live Day 547: Sartana Death Toll Rises to 3,” *The Interpreter*, August 18, 2015, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-live-day-547-sartana-death-toll-rises-to-3/#9572>.

<sup>191</sup> “Hollande, Merkel, Putin back bid for new Ukraine ceasefire,” Reuters, August 29, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/08/29/us-ukraine-crisis-ceasefire-idUSKCN0QY0HY20150829>.

<sup>192</sup> “Ukraine Live Day 569: Despite Only 4 Attacks Last Night, Turchynov Warns Possibility of Offensive Remains,” *The Interpreter*, September 9, 2015, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-live-day-569-despite-only-4-attacks-last-night-turchynov-warns-possibility-of-offensive-remains/#9863>.

# “Cargo 200”—Russian Soldiers Killed in Action in Ukraine

As we have seen, Russia’s military presence in Ukraine became evident during the invasion of the Crimean peninsula on February 26, 2014. The “little green men,” as they came to be known, tried to keep a low profile by stripping off their insignia. They took over Ukrainian airfields and army bases by overwhelming force, usually without a shot. Initially it was suggested that only the existing quota of Russian troops based in Crimea under an agreement with Ukraine were responsible for this quiet seizure of power. Ultimately, however, Putin himself conceded that *Spetsnaz* had been sent there for the express purpose of annexing the peninsula forcibly, ostensibly in the name of the will of the ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking peoples in the region.<sup>193</sup>

The 76th Guards Air Assault Division of the Russian Federation Airborne Troops, based in Pskov, were first sighted in Crimea in March 2014; a picture of the troops by a campfire at the Belbek Airfield was circulated on social media.<sup>194</sup> As *The Interpreter* reported,<sup>195</sup> these troops had earlier been reported missing from their barracks in Pskov by Lev Shlosberg, a deputy in the Pskov regional legislature from the oppositional Yabloko Party, who protested against the soldiers’ deployment abroad to forcibly annex Crimea. For his trouble, he was denounced as a “fifth columnist” by the Pskov region’s acting governor, Andrei Turchak. Shlosberg later suffered a severe beating by unknown assailants in Pskov because he continued to ask questions regarding why some of the paratroopers of the 76th were missing and later turning up killed.

## First Battle at the Donetsk Airport, May 2014

The first big story on the Russian soldiers killed in Ukraine was done by freelance photojournalist Mariya Turchenkova who published a blog post on the *Ekho Moskvy* website in June 2014.<sup>196</sup> She tracked reports of the killing of volunteer Sergei Zhdanovich of Elektrogorsk, contending that, based on some social media claims, he was an officer working for Russia’s Federal Security Service (the FSB, one of the successor agencies of the Soviet KGB), although *The Interpreter* was unable to confirm this even at the links provided.<sup>197</sup>

The regional publication *Caucasian Knot* said that “35 [to] 50” bodies were returned to the Caucasus, citing some relatives’ accounts that the dead were being buried in local cemeteries and families were ordered by authorities to keep silent. These soldiers were said to be fighting in the Zapad and Vostok *Spetsnaz* battalions, which had been under GRU command in the Soviet era and were later disbanded but reconstituted for the war in Ukraine. The Vostok Battalion in the Donbass is now headed by Aleksandr Khodakovsky, a former commander of the Alpha special unit of Ukraine’s Security Service (SBU).<sup>198</sup> No names of soldiers were provided, however, and the information could not be verified.

Turchenkova also followed the story of Lyana, the widow of Yevgeny Korolenko, a 47-year-old Soviet–Afghan war veteran from Rostov who volunteered to fight with the separatists and was killed at the battle of

<sup>193</sup> “Putin Reveals Secrets of Russia’s Crimea Takeover Plot,” BBC World, March 9, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-31796226>.

<sup>194</sup> “Russia This Week (March 24–28, 2014),” *The Interpreter*, [www.interpretermag.com/russia-this-week-are-us-sanctions-having-an-impact/#1623](http://www.interpretermag.com/russia-this-week-are-us-sanctions-having-an-impact/#1623).

<sup>195</sup> “Ukraine Liveblog Day 11: Airports Seized,” *The Interpreter*, February 28, 2014, [www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-11-airports-seized/#2134](http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-11-airports-seized/#2134).

<sup>196</sup> See Mariya Turchenkova, “Cargo 200,” *Ekho Moskvy*, June 2, 2014, <http://echo.msk.ru/blog/maryautomne/1332306-echo/>; and “A Russian Journalist Follows Up on ‘Cargo 200’ from Donetsk,” *The Interpreter*, June 19, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/a-russian-journalist-follows-up-on-Cargo-200-from-donetsk/>. The latter is a summary of Turchenkova’s article and other articles on the subject that appeared in *Novaya Gazeta* and *Ekho Moskvy*.

<sup>197</sup> “Russia This Week (June 9–14, 2014),” *The Interpreter*, <http://www.interpretermag.com/russia-this-week-politkovskayas-murderers-sentenced-but-not-contractor/#1024>.

<sup>198</sup> “Chechen Residents: ‘Dozens of Those Killed in Battle in Ukraine Have Been Delivered to the Republic,’” *Caucasian Knot*, May 29, 2014, published in translation by *The Interpreter*, May 30, 2015, <http://www.interpretermag.com/chechen-residents-dozens-of-those-killed-in-battle-in-ukraine-have-been-delivered-to-the-republic/>.

the Donetsk Airport on May 26, 2014,<sup>199</sup> which, as we noted earlier, was also the first major clash to lead to multiple deaths and, therefore, a turning point in the war. Prior to this battle, the Russian-backed offensive had involved detentions, kidnappings, torture, and murder of some captives, as well as a number of killings in gunfights as separatists took over some 100 administrative buildings in dozens of towns in south-eastern Ukraine. Before May, there was not all-out war in the country, and the Russian presence was not so visible. Khodakovsky, who led not only the Vostok Battalion but all Russian-backed forces at Donetsk Airport, made an arrangement with Ukrainian troops to retreat but was then ambushed.

Elena Kostyuchenko, a special correspondent for the independent newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*, continued the story begun by Turchenkova, reporting that at the Russian–Ukrainian border crossing at Uspenka, three men in camouflage arrived, turned off the surveillance cameras, ordered that mobile phones be turned off, and then confiscated those phones. The border guards did not look inside the vehicle in which the men were traveling nor receive any manifests; the passage was not recorded. Yet inside the refrigerated compartment of the vehicle there were 31 bodies—Russian militiamen who had died in battle at the Donetsk Airport on May 26.

Pictures published by *Novaya Gazeta* later showed a clumsy sign on the truck that read *Gruz-200* (“Cargo 200”), the Russian military term for transport by air or ground of the bodies of soldiers killed in war. The term was well known to generations of Russians from the Soviet war in Afghanistan and subsequent wars in Chechnya and Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Now it had been revived, albeit surreptitiously, for an undeclared Russian war in Ukraine.

The fact that 31 out of the 40 or more fighters killed that day turned out to be from Russia was the first strong indication of Russian involvement in a war that Moscow claimed was merely a civil conflict among Ukrainians. But while the bodies were sent to Russia, journalists struggled to find out and confirm the names and the facts of the story, as the dead were all from small towns scattered across Chechnya, Dagestan, and elsewhere in the North Caucasus. Only two names were possible to determine when the caskets were handed over by separatist leaders: Sergei Zhdanovich

and Yuri Abrosimov. Two more subsequently turned up on social media networks: Aleksey Yurin and Aleksandr Yefremov, who had previously served in the reconnaissance regiment of the 45th Special Purpose Separate Guards Airborne Troops. Kostyuchenko hunted through both civilian and military morgues, bounced from one to another by various evasive officials.

Korolenko, the Soviet–Afghan war veteran, was an avid war gamer, *Novaya Gazeta*’s Kostyuchenko found. He was first contacted by a group on Russia’s most popular social network, VKontakte, called “Russian Volunteers/Donbass” that had 10,000 subscribers; later, he followed up on the contact within one of his games.

Rostov Region was perfect for recruiting, Kostyuchenko was told, as there are 68,000 veterans of conflicts from Afghanistan to Georgia, as well as Cossacks who took part in the Transnistria conflict, residing there. Lyana, Korolenko’s widow, also explained another important element of her husband’s recruitment. First the official Rostov draft board sent him a notice saying that they were updating their address lists and he should call them. Then the draft board stated they would call back on Russian Army Day (February 23) because they were planning to hand out medals. They never called back, and Lyana was unable to confirm that this communication was related to his ultimate recruitment, but other fighters tell of contact with the draft board or local veterans’ societies that later led to volunteering for service in the Donbass.

Ultimately, Lyana was able to find a picture of her husband’s dead body on a grotesque LiveJournal blog that published dozens of close-up facial portraits of the dead Russian soldiers, many containing numbers on their photographs. The blog has not been updated since June 2014.<sup>200</sup>

## The Battles of August 2014

On August 18, 2014, the official website of the Russian Presidential Administration announced a decree by Putin granting the 76th Guards Air Division of Pskov the Suvorov Award for “successful fulfillment of the command’s combat assignments and display by the personnel staff of courage and heroism.”<sup>201</sup> The

<sup>199</sup> “Russian Journalist Follows Up on ‘Cargo 200’,” *The Interpreter*, June 19, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/russia-this-week-politkovskayas-murderers-sentenced-but-not-contractor/#1024>.

<sup>200</sup> “Photos of Colorado Killed 18+,” *Independent Information Tape*, June 15, 2014, <http://antikoinfo.livejournal.com/353674.html>.

<sup>201</sup> “Evidence of Russia’s 76th Guards Air Assault Division in Southeast Ukraine,” *The Interpreter*, August 21, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-185-russian-airborne-forces-reportedly-captured-in-ukraine/#3892>.

decree did not attract much attention that day, but it did gain notice three days later, on August 21, when Ukrainian forces captured a BMD-2 in Lutugino, in Lugansk Region, and claimed it was Russian.<sup>202</sup> Even more questions were raised when Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu personally flew to Pskov Region to hand out the awards.<sup>203</sup>

Many of the websites and projects that track reports of Russian fighters killed in Ukraine began on or soon after August 21, 2014, when the BMD-2 was confiscated.<sup>204</sup> Ukrainian journalists Roman Bochkala and Leonid Shvets were the first to publish information about the documents of Russian soldiers found in the BMD-2.<sup>205</sup> LiveJournal bloggers matched 15 names in the documents to accounts on VKontakte.<sup>206</sup> In the following days, *The Interpreter* also accessed the same accounts and watched in real time as they were removed or had pictures deleted from them faster than they could be archived.<sup>207</sup>

Russia's independent press also began tracking down news of missing, wounded, or killed soldiers, facing intense denials from the Defense Ministry, attacks from thugs, and vilification by pro-Kremlin propagandists who claimed the investigators were Photoshopping pictures, faking information, or in the pay of Western intelligence agencies.

When the Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) announced it had 10 POWs in Kiev and released videotaped interrogations of them, activists were emboldened to try to find out more about them and other missing soldiers who had supposedly been "sent for training" by Russia.

Bochkala and Shvets claimed that the Ukrainian 24th Brigade of the Armed Forces and the "Storm" Special Division had seized the vehicle and documents. Shvets wrote that the documents included a folder labeled with the name of Lt. Popov, the platoon commander, as well as the duty roster, the evening inspection logbook, and the journal of the decommis-

sioned. "The crew. . . well, let's say they got lost on the way," he quipped. Bochkala added:

Light-blue berets and Rollton noodle briquettes [a just-add-water soup, similar to Ramen] were scattered over the battlefield. In the photographs are visible the combat vehicle and a PKT machine gun displayed with the name plate of a gunner, Private N. D. Surnachev. This last name and initials are also indicated in the evening inspection journal, along with the names of other soldiers from the Russian Army, apparently fighting in Ukraine. For example, from the passport of N. S. Krygin it follows that he is from Pskov Region, born in 1994. That tells us that Putin has a problem with experienced recruits since young, green fighters are being thrown into combat. Here is what the wife of one of the servicemen from the Pskov Airborne Division wrote me yesterday on Facebook: 'Our husbands were sent recently to Ukraine. As if for training. They didn't know where they were being sent. Ever since there has not been any phone call or greeting from them. We are sitting and crying for them!'

Among the items visible in the photos were credit cards belonging to someone named Ilya Maksimov, later found to be one of the paratroopers; a folder with the name of Popov, Unit 74268's platoon commander; and the scope for an AK-74m Tyulpan. All seemed to be clear indications of a Russian military presence.<sup>208</sup>

As the Odessa news site *Dumskaya.net* pointed out,<sup>209</sup> when a Russian soldier is drafted into the army, his passport is taken from him and held by military command on the army base, leaving him to carry only his draft card. So the only way passports could be found in a BMD-2 after a battle is if these soldiers were contractors who formally resigned from the army and became "volunteers."

Vasily Sychev, a military expert contacted by

<sup>202</sup> "IFV from Russian Airborne Division Captured in Ukraine," *The Interpreter*, August 21, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-185-russian-airborne-forces-reportedly-captured-in-ukraine/#3889>.

<sup>203</sup> "Russian Defense Minister Shoigu Travels to Pskov to Give Awards to 76th Guards," *The Interpreter*, August 24, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/17850/#3921>.

<sup>204</sup> See "IFV from Russian Airborne Division," *The Interpreter*; and "Russian Activists Form Facebook Groups, Web Sites to Look for Soldiers MIA, KIA," *The Interpreter*, <http://www.interpretermag.com/russia-this-week/#4037>.

<sup>205</sup> "Russian Press and Social Media Mine VKontakte for Information on Russian Paratroopers," *The Interpreter*, <http://www.interpretermag.com/17850/#3922>. (For the Ukrainian battle with Russian servicemen in the village of Georgievka near Lutugino on August 21, 2014, see <https://www.facebook.com/leo.shvets/posts/753181591391648> and <https://www.facebook.com/bochkala/posts/789072054478519>.)

<sup>206</sup> "Russian Press and Social Media Mine VKontakte," *The Interpreter*.

<sup>207</sup> "What's Happening to Social Media Accounts of Russian Paratroopers Reported Captured?," *The Interpreter*, <http://www.interpretermag.com/17850/#3926>.

<sup>208</sup> Bochkala, <https://www.facebook.com/bochkala/posts/789072054478519>.

<sup>209</sup> "Odessa Volunteer Fighters Took Part in Destruction of Pskov Paratroopers' Company," *Dumskaya.net*, August 21, 2014, <http://dumskaya.net/news/odesskie-dobrovolcy-prinyali-uchastie-v-unichtog-038431//4/>.

reporters, questioned all the items, saying that the Rollton brand of instant noodles was not part of the dry rations issued to Russian soldiers and that a nametag on a machine gun was odd, as usually these weapons are signed out and the information recorded at the base. Soldiers do not place such nameplates on the weapons, Sychev claimed.

Russian blogger Viktor Kadochnikov was among the first to note that most of the soldiers in the group had not accessed their social media accounts after August 15 or 16; only one had logged in on August 17.<sup>210</sup>

Shortly thereafter, Russian journalist Aleksei Amyotov reported on Twitter that he had found a man going to Ulan-Ude, the capital of the Buryat Republic, to bury his son, who he said was a paratrooper killed near Donetsk.<sup>211</sup>

More recently, an archived copy of Nikolai Surnachev's VKontakte page shows pictures of him posing with Russian army buddies wearing the *telnyashka*, the striped t-shirt worn by paratroopers. The archive shows a picture of him in military uniform on March 24, 2015; this post, however, is missing from the live version of his account.<sup>212</sup> There is nothing in his current set of posts that would indicate he ever fought in Ukraine or indeed had an opinion on the conflict. Among his friends is Marsel Suleymanov, a man with a picture of himself and a military comrade; both are wearing the *telnyashka* and light-blue berets customary among VDV soldiers, which suggests they served together in the Airborne Troops.<sup>213</sup> As of August 20, 2015, all posts before August 5, 2015, have been deleted. It is difficult to tell whether Surnachev is dead or alive. Perhaps his account is being maintained by his girlfriend, who refreshed it on the anniversary of his death.

Surnachev's case is typical of many social media accounts of Russian soldiers killed in Ukraine. But while these accounts are helpful in providing clues, they are not a substitute for journalistic spadework that confirms the whereabouts and status of suspected Russian soldiers in Ukraine by contacting relatives, friends, or the soldiers themselves.

## Separatists' Admission of Russian Presence

The Russian military presence in Ukraine was widely documented on social media, with numerous videos of Russian convoys in Ukraine and soldiers with Russian accents nonnative to the Donbass. Despite this informal coverage on blogs and social media, however, the rumor was not validated until August 28, 2014, when Russia's state TV1 quoted a speech by Aleksandr Zakharchenko, the prime minister of the self-declared Donetsk People's Republic, that could only be understood as referring to Russian citizens: "I will say something even more candid: among us are fighting active military, who prefer to spend their leave not on the ocean beaches but among us, among their brothers, who are fighting for their freedom."<sup>214</sup>

This notion of the "vacationers" took hold and became a sarcastic meme for many bloggers describing the war.

## The Curious Case of Leonid Kichatkin

Attempting to follow up on VKontakte clues can be frustrating—and ultimately dangerous to reporters. Anatoly Vorobey, a Russian-language blogger based in Tel Aviv who blogs at *avva.livejournal.com*, discovered just how unreliable social media can be for investigating such cases.<sup>215</sup> After posting the published picture of the logbooks from the BMD-2 that included a listing for Leonid Kichatkin, age 30, a senior sergeant in the unit, a notice outlined in red was posted to Kichatkin's VKontakte page that read: "Dear Friends!!!!!!!!!!!! Lyona [Leonid] was killed funeral Monday at 10:00 wake in Vybuty. Who would like to bid farewell please come we will be glad to see you. If anything call [telephone number] Wife Oksana."

Vorobey found earlier posts from Oksana on her own page, saying first that she was waiting desperately for news of Leonid, then that "life had stopped," and finally that she expected her husband's coffin "within five days." All of this, plus the condolences of friends,

<sup>210</sup> "What Happened to the Pskov Division?," August 23, 2014, <http://kado4nikov.livejournal.com/18424.html>.

<sup>211</sup> Aleksei Amyotov, Twitter feed, August 25, 2014, 12:09 a.m., <https://twitter.com/Amyot/status/503801322584694784>.

<sup>212</sup> Archive of VKontakte account of Nikita Surnachev, <https://archive.is/4E3oF>.

<sup>213</sup> Marsel Suleymanov's profile, <https://vk.com/id285059213>.

<sup>214</sup> TV1, August 28, 2014, <http://www.1tv.ru/news/world/266444>. The statement was cited widely by national and local media. See, e.g., Oleg Konstantinov, "Pskov Informally Commemorated 16 Dead on the Battlefield of the Marines," *Kuryyer*, September 2, 2014, <http://www.province.ru/pskov/news/item/1325-pskovichi-neoficialno-pominajut-16-pogibshih-na-pole-boja-desantnikov>.

<sup>215</sup> <http://avva.livejournal.com/2800178.html#comments>.



appeared to be unmistakable proof that Kichatkin was among those killed at Lutugino.

By Sunday, August 24, however, Kichatkin's page on VKontakte, as well as his page on Odnoklassniki, had been removed. Around the same time, Oksana (or perhaps someone else who had assumed control over her account) wrote: "My husband is alive and well and we are now marking the baptism of our daughter."

Ivan Vasyunin, a journalist from *Russkaya Planeta*, posted a notice on Twitter that he had reached Oksana and spoken to a man who identified himself as Leonid, and that the couple had asked people not to call.<sup>216</sup>

## Secret Funerals for the 76th

*Slon.ru*'s Aleksei Ponomarev reported on August 25, 2014, that the funerals for the dead paratroopers had been closed to the public.<sup>217</sup> He was told by a local eyewitness that about 100 people were present at the service, conducted at a small cemetery near a fifteenth-century church, not far from the military base of the 76th Division. The funeral was under police guard, and no outsiders were permitted to attend.

Military spokesmen denied the stories, even though military wreaths were found on the graves. Lieutenant General Vladimir Shamanov, commander of the Russian Airborne Forces, said that "everyone is alive and well in our assault paratroopers division." Major General Igor Konashenkov of the Russian Defense Ministry also stated this information was "a falsehood" when Ukrainian forces said they had seized a Russian BMD with documents of paratroopers killed or captured.<sup>218</sup>

When pictures of the soldiers' graves began to appear on social media, pro-Kremlin trolls said the images had been Photoshopped, and a debate about the authenticity of the news ensued. Hoping to get to the bottom of the story, on August 25, *Novaya Gazeta*'s Nina Petlyanova and Irina Tumanova, a reporter from the St. Petersburg newspaper *Fontaka.ru*, traveled to Pskov Region to find out more.<sup>219</sup>

Initially, when Petlyanova called the Kichatkins, Oksana Kichatkin once again insisted that her husband Leonid was alive, and that his VKontakte page had been hacked. Oksana gave the phone to a man who said he was Leonid, was alive and well, and had not



Grave of Anton Savelev, soldier of unit no. 54607 of the 16th Separate Spetsnaz Brigade of the GRU, killed in Ukraine. Photo: Vadim Korovin, Ruslan Leviev

gone anywhere because his wife was "pregnant, plus there are three children." He also offered to "sing a song for you or dance for the video camera" to prove his status as living.

Baffled, the journalists continued to the graveyard near the 76th Division base, where they found a grave bearing the name of Leonid Yuryevich Kichatkin and dates of his life, September 30, 1984–August 19, 2014, as well as wreaths from military units. A major standing near the grave told them that two soldiers had just been buried, Kichatkin and another whose grave read "Aleksandr Sergeyeovich Osipov [December 15, 1993–August 20, 2014]." The major turned out to be the father of Aleksandr Osipov. He was mourning his

<sup>216</sup> Ivan Vasyunin, Twitter feed, August 24, 2014, 7:04 a.m., <https://twitter.com/vasyunin/status/503543434628833280>.

<sup>217</sup> Aleksei Ponomarev, "In Pskov, the Funerals of Local Marines Have Been Closed," *Slon.ru*, August 25, 2014, <http://slon.ru/fast/russia/vpskove-proshli-zakrytye-pokhorony-mestnykh-desantnikov-1147710.xhtml>.

<sup>218</sup> "Landing," *Novaya Gazeta*, August 26, 2014, <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/society/64975.html>.

<sup>219</sup> "Podrobnosti napadeniya na zhurnalistov u kladbishcha pod Pskovom," *Novaya Gazeta*, August 26, 2014, <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/news/1686247.html>.

son, whom he had sent off to war in Ukraine.

As is customary at Russian gravesides, the major had a small table with bottles of vodka, bread, and tomatoes for the wake. He and the journalists drank to the memory of Aleksandr, and the major said: “He wanted to be a hero. . . . Soldiers have a job to do. Somebody has to pay their debt to the Motherland.” He said that Aleksandr’s convoy had been caught between mortar and Grad fire after spending only a week in Ukraine. He did not know how many had been killed but said there were more to bury.

Near Kichatkin’s grave, the journalists also discovered one of Kichatkin’s relatives, who said that the family had held a brief service for Kichatkin, who had “been killed near Lugansk while fulfilling his military duties.” That was all he knew. By then, the telephone number Petlyanova had been calling, on which Kichatkin’s wife and her supposed husband had previously responded to queries, was disconnected.<sup>220</sup>

The pair returned the next day, August 26, to investigate the other graves with Vladimir Romensky of TV Rain and Ilya Vasyunin of the Russian news site *Russkaya Planeta*; however, they were pushed back by a group of local thugs whom they believed had been directed by the authorities. They then met with other reporters from *Novaya Gazeta* and *Fontanka*, attempted another visit, and were attacked again, but Romensky and Vasyunin managed to film their ordeal.

In one of these videos, which became emblematic for the Russian media community of the thwarted attempts to cover the Cargo 200 issue, the journalists were shown caroming around a graveyard in a car as hooded thugs in tracksuits threw rocks at the vehicle, trying to break their windows, and wielded large screws to try to puncture their tires.<sup>221</sup> One reporter made a frantic call to police to try to get the authorities to intervene; another reporter attempted to get the attackers to back off, saying that he and his colleagues would leave the cemetery. Meanwhile, clearly seen in

the background of the video were fresh graves, heaped with flowers under wooden cross-barréd Russian Orthodox crosses and wreaths from the Russian Airborne Division. As one YouTube commentator, Dmitry Shchelokov, noted on TV Rain’s video posting:

This isn’t thugs hiding their face; this is Putin showing his face. This is the essence of Putin’s policy, just as in the attack on Ukraine—hidden faces, obvious intentions and obvious contractors [to carry out the job]. Putin’s FSB sent their thug stand-ins to prevent the journalists from finding the graves of the Pskov paratroopers, killed in Ukraine, a small crime to cover up the tracks of a bigger crime of Putin.

Russian military officials denied any relationship of the incident to the war in Ukraine. But TV Rain also reported that Sergei Kovalchenko, editor-in-chief of the *Telegraf* wire service, was stopped at the cemetery in Vybuty on August 26 as well. Venera Galeyeva of *Fontanka* also tweeted about the attack.<sup>222</sup>

On August 30, Petlyanova reported that Kichatkin’s relatives were being threatened with the loss of any death benefits or pensions connected to their loved ones if they spoke to the press.<sup>223</sup> The division commander stonewalled the reporters. Relatives of the alleged slain said they had heard nothing from the men since August 15 or 16; worse, they said, the 76th’s commanders told them to keep quiet and not talk to the press or anyone else.

## The Missing Paratrooper Company

Ultimately, an entire company of Pskov paratroopers was reported to have been killed fighting in Ukraine in August, *Pskovskaya Guberniya* and *Slon.ru* reported on September 2.<sup>224</sup> After these outlets

<sup>220</sup> “Independent Russian Journalists Follow Up on Paratroopers’ Burials,” *The Interpreter*, August 30, 2015, <http://www.interpretermag.com/russia-this-week/>.

<sup>221</sup> “Video: Attacks on Journalists in the Cemetery Near Pskov,” TV Rain, August 26, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IuUWShP9rRM>.

<sup>222</sup> “In Pskov Unknown Individuals Attacked the Chief Editor of the *Telegraf* Agency,” TV Rain, August 26, 2014, [http://tvrain.ru/news/v\\_vybutah\\_neizvestnye\\_zaderzhali\\_glavreda\\_agentstva\\_telegraf-374585/](http://tvrain.ru/news/v_vybutah_neizvestnye_zaderzhali_glavreda_agentstva_telegraf-374585/); see also Venera Galeyeva, Twitter feed, August 26, 2014, 8:06 a.m., [https://twitter.com/venera\\_galeyeva/status/504283750084386816](https://twitter.com/venera_galeyeva/status/504283750084386816).

<sup>223</sup> Nina Petlyanova, “This Is the First Combat-Ready Company, In Case of War,” *Novaya Gazeta*, August 28, 2014, <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/society/65017.html>.

<sup>224</sup> “Ukraine Liveblog Day 197: Entire Pskov ‘Company’ Killed in Ukraine: Local Newspaper,” *The Interpreter*, September 2, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-197-ukraine-reportedly-loses-control-of-telmanovo-north-of-mariupol/#4097>; “The Whole Company Gone,” *Pskovskaya Guberniya*, September 3–9, 2014, [http://gubernia.pskovregion.org/number\\_706/00.php](http://gubernia.pskovregion.org/number_706/00.php); Aleksei Ponomarev, “Pskov Paratroopers Spoke About the Deaths of Dozens of Their Comrades,” *Slon.ru*, September 2, 2014, <http://slon.ru/fast/russia/pskovskie-desantniki-rasskazali-o-gibeli-desyatkov-svoikh-tovarishchey-1151234.xhtml>.

published the news of the three paratroopers' funerals, they were contacted by other paratroopers who requested anonymity but gave them a tape of an interview with soldiers in the company. The soldiers on the tape claimed that only 10 men had survived out of 80, and that as many as 140 could have died.

Lev Shlosberg, the Rostov regional deputy in the Yabloko Party, told Russian blogger Oleg Kashin that the families of the paratroopers were told to keep quiet and threatened with the loss of state welfare if they spoke out. Shlosberg said the causes of death were listed variously as “explosion of a gas tank,” “heart attack,” or “stroke,” and the places of death were not indicated.<sup>225</sup>

To date, no one has been able to produce a list of all 80 names from the 1st Parachute Paratrooper Company of the Pskov Airborne Troops Division. What happened to them remains an open question.

Meanwhile, reports began to trickle in concerning funerals not only in Pskov Region but also in Belgorod, Voronezh, and elsewhere. One woman, Olga Alekseyeva, the wife of 27-year-old Sgt. Ruslan Fyodorov, a contract soldier killed in battle, said officers told her “everything’s fine, everyone’s alive.” However, by that time, it was already known that at least three other paratroopers from the 76th had been killed. Alekseyeva confirmed that Anton Korolenko, who had studied in the same military academy as her husband; Kichatkin, with whom he had also served; and Aleksandr Osipov, mentioned earlier, had also been killed. Osipov, Korolenko, Fyodorov, and Kichatkin were all in the 234th First Company of the Pskov Air Assault Guards of the Airborne Troops Division, which was considered to be the combat-ready company “in the event of war,” Alekseyeva explained.<sup>226</sup> Her testimony seemingly corroborates what Ukrainian journalists Roman Bochkala and Leonid Shvets had reported earlier.

## The St. Petersburg Soldiers’ Mothers and the Missing Soldiers from the North Caucasus

The Soldiers’ Mothers Committees, a movement formed even before the two Chechen wars in the 1990s, originally focused on the rampant abuse, hazing, and deaths that occurred in the Russian peacetime army. With the onset of the war in Ukraine, the Soldiers’ Mothers advised recruits on alternative

service to the draft and their right to refuse combat service outside of Russia, as well as began looking into reports of soldiers killed in Ukraine, though they evidently hoped that if they did not publicize these cases immediately, they might get answers from Russian officials before a blackout on talking to the media was inaugurated.

The movement to uncover the deaths of Russian soldiers in the Donbass has been particularly active in two cities: St. Petersburg, where servicemen wounded in Ukraine were allegedly brought to a military hospital located there in August 2014; and Kostroma, the army base from which POWs captured by Ukrainian forces in August 2014 also originated.

In Russia, the Presidential Council for the Development of Civil Society and Human Rights is a body meant to investigate human rights abuses in Russia and is answerable to the office of the president—at least in theory. While some reputable human rights defenders remain in the Presidential Council (recently, veteran Moscow Helsinki Group leader Ludmila Alexeyeva rejoined it), it has become largely ineffective, as its leader has been able to meet with President Putin only once in 2014. Furthermore, the Council is only able to speak in a highly scripted fashion about topics acceptable to Putin, such as children’s welfare. Indeed, in his last meeting with Putin, Mikhail Fedotov, chair of the Council, only discussed the need to pressure Poroshenko to do more for displaced persons and refugees, making no reference to the problem of Russia’s launching the war in Ukraine in the first place. Fedotov did not raise the credible reports that have been made by his Council’s own members that Russian soldiers are participating in this conflict, that Russia is backing the insurgents, and that Russia has fired missiles from its territory into Ukraine.

Using the legitimacy of their positions on this official body, two members—Ella Polyakova, head of the St. Petersburg Soldiers’ Mothers, and Sergei Krivenko, coordinator of the Citizen and Army civic movement—sent an inquiry to the Russian Investigative Committee, a special law enforcement body, with a request to conduct an investigation into the circumstances of the deaths of nine contract soldiers from the 18th Motor Rifle Brigade (army unit 27777), most of whom are natives of Dagestan, a Muslim region in the North Caucasus. According to the official government story, the riflemen died while training in Rostov Region on August 9 and 11.

<sup>225</sup> “Visiting Shlosberg at the Hospital,” Oleg Kashin, September 2, 2014, <http://kashin.guru/2014/09/02/lev-2/>.

<sup>226</sup> Nina Petlyanova, “This Is the First Combat-Ready Company, In Case of War.”

Meanwhile, regional Dagestan news site *Chernovik* caught wind of the news that at least nine Caucasians had been killed in Ukraine and, in an article on August 22, urged relatives to contact them with details.<sup>227</sup>

A paratrooper who requested anonymity told *Chernovik* that the soldiers' deployment was "voluntary-forced," as the saying goes in Russian, meaning that while it was technically a voluntary choice, soldiers were placed under much pressure to serve in combat. The paratrooper said: "Those who refuse to go, for example, are brought out on the parade grounds and accused of cowardice and so on in front of the line up. That is, they put mental pressure on them."

*Chernovik* further reported:

Participation in the conflict, the editors' sources maintain, is like a "shuttle." The armed formation (is it legal?) enters the territory of Ukraine, performs a combat assignment, then leaves the territory of the country. In one such operation, our countrymen fell under artillery fire from the ATO. Among those killed were five natives from the town of Kazanishche, one from Atlanaul, a village in Buynaksk District and another from the village of Shagada in Khasavyurt District. Another from Buynaksk is missing. According to unconfirmed sources, "Cargo 200" have come to Kizilyurt, the village of Belidzhi (Derbentsky District) and Aksay (Khasavyurt District).

*Chernovik* claimed that two tank companies had crossed the Russian–Ukrainian border, and contract soldiers from the Russian navy, hailing from units deployed in the Caspian Sea, were also sent into Ukraine.

In the comment section of the *Chernovik* article, readers added that "Cargo 200" had come to the village of Aksay in Khasavyurt District; the village of Chagarotar; and the village of Dzhugdil in Tabasar District, where a funeral took place on August 20. One commenter from Tabasar said that a fighter who had been wounded in Ukraine was back in the village. Other readers denied that such things could happen and even denounced *Chernovik* for engaging in "sabotage." The news site, they insisted, should be

prosecuted.

However, there were rumors at this time that as many as 400 contractors from Dagestan had been killed in combat in Ukraine by August 2014. Bloggers and regional press began to report this story, although there was no confirmation of the facts. On August 19, the Ukrainian news site *UNN* said the story originated from Rasul Abu Asad, a resident of Khasavyurt in Dagestan. *UNN* quoted Asad as saying on his Facebook page: "You will never believe it. I wouldn't have believed it either, if someone else had told me."<sup>228</sup> Asad then allegedly continued: "More than 400 contract Dagestani contract soldiers were killed in Ukraine. 224 people were brought back a few days ago to Dagestan. 200 of them are men who had served in Shali and 70 in Khankala [Russian military bases]. Many of them had gone crazy. One father went to pick up his son. When he saw his son, he died on the spot." On August 20, 2014, the LiveJournal blogger "Saracinua" said exactly the same thing and offered the same details, although he appeared to be a different person from Asad.<sup>229</sup> However, no link to Asad's Facebook page was provided by *UNN*, and *The Interpreter* was unable to find the posting.

LiveJournal and Facebook posts often contain material from other bloggers without attribution—such is the nature of social media, where copying and pasting is the work of a moment. In this particular case, the story of the "400 killed" could not be confirmed.

*UNN* did, however, check with Donetsk's *mufti* (an Islamic head cleric), Said Ismagilov, reasoning that if funerals were held there, he would know about them. Ismagilov told the news site that no one had contacted him about such cases and no bodies of Dagestanis had been brought to his mosque, although he was aware that Dagestanis were indeed fighting in Ukraine. He did not find the claim of 400 credible, considering the number too large, although he did add that possibly the bodies were returned immediately to Dagestan and funeral rites were conducted locally.<sup>230</sup>

<sup>227</sup> "Cargo 200," *Chernovik*, August 22, 2014, <http://chernovik.net/content/politika/gruz-200>.

<sup>228</sup> "About 400 'Contract' Fighters from Dagestan Killed During Fighting in Donbass," *UNN*, August 19, 2015, <http://www.unn.com.ua/ru/news/1377222-blizko-400-kontraktiv-iz-dagestanu-zaginuli-pid-chas-boyiv-na-donbasi-fb>.

<sup>229</sup> Saracinua, "Dagestan Began to Receive Zinc Coffins En Masse from Ukraine," August 20, 2014, <http://saracinua.livejournal.com/1454475.html>.

<sup>230</sup> "About 400 'Contract' Fighters from Dagestan Killed During Fighting in Donbass."



## Committee of Soldiers' Mothers of Stavropol Territory

On August 27, after publishing materials from the St. Petersburg Soldier's Mothers, the independent television network TV Rain reported that the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers in Stavropol Territory had made a list of 400 killed and wounded Russian soldiers.<sup>231</sup>

Ludmila Bogatenkova, leader of the Mothers of Prikomya, a regional group that was part of the Stavropol Committee, and a long-time activist on the issue of conscripts' rights, told TV Rain that the list had been made "from various sources in the armed forces which the Committee could not disclose." She further said that the killed and wounded servicemen were mainly from Vladikavkaz, Shumlen, Shalin, and Borzoi, and that several motorized brigades were involved.<sup>232</sup> She added that there were soldiers from other units, and that the list was being constantly updated with new additions. She did not mention the Dagestani soldiers, but presumably they were included in her list if it was that long. She did not publish the list of names and units.

This news was subsequently picked up by the BBC's Russian- and English-language services.<sup>233</sup> What had begun as exposés by two Ukrainian bloggers about 15 Pskov paratroopers had now snowballed into a rolling scandal of many dozens of allegedly killed Russian soldiers in Ukraine, mainly from the North Caucasus. The BBC report was the first major foreign news story on the subject of Cargo 200.

It should hardly come as a surprise that Caucasians were the ones dispatched to fight in a *maskirovka* insurgency, because they had been spotted in the Donbass at the onset of the war.<sup>234</sup> On May 25, for instance, a CNN reporter found a truckload of Chechens at a "Novorossiya" election rally in Donetsk.<sup>235</sup> *The Interpreter* published other geolocated footage, filmed

by a Russian volunteer, of Russian fighters in the area of Snezhnoye, which showed groups of Chechen combatants.<sup>236</sup>

Chechen president Ramzan Kadyrov initially denied the presence of Chechens in Ukraine but then conceded that there were a few "volunteers" there, adding that he would be happy to send 74,000 and go fight for the pro-Russian cause himself.<sup>237</sup> There were repeated reports of Interior Ministry battalions from Chechnya fighting at the Donetsk Airport throughout the fall of 2014 and up to the defeat of the Ukrainian army in January 2015. In July 2015, Kadyrov claimed that all Chechens had been brought home from Ukraine.<sup>238</sup>

## Kostroma POWs, KIA, and MIA, and the First Demonstrations

The reported deaths of Russian soldiers and the return of their bodies to the Motherland seemed to be definitive proof of Russian military presence in Ukraine, but each case was routinely questioned, relatives silenced, and the allegations met with the response that the subject in question was only a "volunteer" and not under the command and control of the Russian armed forces.

On August 26, when the Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) reported that 10 Russian soldiers had been captured and that all had given testimony about their original bases and units, the notion of "volunteers" began to be dispelled.

Full coverage of the POW issue is outside the scope of this report. There have been many thousands held by Ukrainians—in some cases, separatists suspicious of their supporters from Russia—and the process of exchange is still underway in accordance with the collapsed Minsk Accords. But we will note that this first

<sup>231</sup> "Soldiers' Mothers Have Compiled a List of 400 Dead and Wounded Russian Soldiers," TV Rain, August 27, 2014, [http://tvrain.ru/news/komitet\\_soldatskih\\_materej\\_sostavil\\_spisok\\_iz\\_400\\_ranenyh\\_i\\_ubityh\\_rossijskih\\_soldat-374625/](http://tvrain.ru/news/komitet_soldatskih_materej_sostavil_spisok_iz_400_ranenyh_i_ubityh_rossijskih_soldat-374625/).

<sup>232</sup> They were the 19th Voronezh-Shumlen Separate Motorized Brigade based in Vladikavkaz, in Northern Ossetia; the 17th Separate Guards Motorized Brigade in Shali, Chechnya; and the 8th Separate Guards Motorized Brigade in the city of Shatoi, in Chechnya.

<sup>233</sup> "Ukraine Conflict: Russian Families Look for Soldier Sons," BBC Europe, August 28, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-28968526>.

<sup>234</sup> "Ukraine Live Day 190: Video Shows Column of Russian Vehicles, Manned by Chechen Fighters, on Ukraine's Border," *The Interpreter*, August 26, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-190-russian-paratroopers-captured-in-ukraine/#3971>.

<sup>235</sup> "Ukraine Liveblog Day 97: Polls Open with Elections Under Threat in East," *The Interpreter*, May 25, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-97-polls-open-with-elections-under-threat-in-east/#2877>.

<sup>236</sup> "Ukraine Liveblog Day 180," *The Interpreter*.

<sup>237</sup> "Russia This Week: Here Comes the Kremlin's Troll Army (June 2–7)," *The Interpreter*, June 6, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/14302/#0946>.

<sup>238</sup> "All Chechen Fighters Have Returned Home from Donbass, Says Kadyrov," *The Interpreter*, July 31, 2015, <http://www.interpretermag.com/russia-update-july-31-2015/#9322>.



and highly visible capture of Russian soldiers marked a turning point in the international community's recognition of Russian aggression against Ukraine.

On August 26, 2014, *The Interpreter* translated a report from the leading Ukrainian news site *Unian.net* about the detention of the 10 soldiers of the 331st regiment of the 98th Guards Airborne Division;<sup>239</sup> Elena Racheva of *Novaya Gazeta* later confirmed the Kostroma POWs' unit.<sup>240</sup> These soldiers, who were detained in the Kiev pretrial detention prison, were questioned by the SBU, and nine of them participated in a press conference (the tenth had suffered severe burns and was transferred to a burn unit in St. Petersburg). They testified that they had been sent to Rostov on August 23, then put on alert and marched into Ukraine on August 24; only the officers were informed that Russian armor would make an incursion into Ukrainian territory.

From hours of footage of the POWs confessions uploaded by the SBU to YouTube, some of which was translated by *The Interpreter*, a pattern emerged: young Russian recruits who had been persuaded to sign up as contractors near the end of their service were not fully informed of what was happening and either believed that they were patrolling the border or participating in exercises, not being flung into combat. At least, that was the story they told interrogators while in captivity and under duress, so those circumstances have to be taken into consideration.<sup>241</sup>

Eventually, after negotiations, all of the POWs were sent back to Russia in exchange for Ukrainian POWs taken by the Russian-backed separatists. Nevertheless, Kostroma remained a focus of attention, as a number of paratroopers remained missing.

Racheva then got in touch with some of the parents and wives of the soldiers, who did not want to publicize their names for fear of reprisals. She found that their accounts coincided with some of the videotaped statements made by the POWs in their coerced confessions. According to these relatives, the soldiers had been told they were going for training in Rostov for two weeks but then suddenly were ordered to take their winter kits as well. The wives were forbidden to come to the base to see off their husbands. One of them disobeyed and came anyway to bring her hus-

band some clothes. She said she saw a lot of military vehicles, more than usual, before the entire regiment departed.

The reporters also learned that the men had been asked if they wanted to go on these "exercises," and some had refused. Forty were immediately discharged. The rest were not told where they were going, but were informed that their combat readiness would be tested.

Racheva reported that one wife, "Elena," said that she believed her husband, "Artyom" (the reporters changed the names to protect their sources), did in fact know the destination, but he had told her that the soldiers had signed nondisclosure agreements and had their cell phones taken from them so they could not be geolocated. Elena received a text message from her husband from the military transport train on August 21 that was sent using a cell phone he kept concealed. It read: "Honey, we're at the Taganrog-1 station, look how far away Ukraine is." (Taganrog is near the Ukrainian border.)

In a subsequent call on August 22 he said his regiment was setting up camp; on August 23, he called again and said the soldiers had been told to remove their nametags from their clothing and their *telnyashki* (the Russian paratroopers' striped t-shirt), and were given military t-shirts and camouflage. All IDs and draft cards had been taken away from them, he said.

In his last phone call, Artyom told Elena not to worry; he would only be gone two or three days, during which he would be unable to call. "Are you going to scare Ukraine?" asked Elena. Artyom laughed and said no, but she felt his voice was different from how it normally was, and he asked to say goodbye to their daughter. On August 24, he called her at 3:00 a.m. to tell her that the regiment was 15 kilometers from the Ukrainian border. It had been roused for an emergency and was going on a 70-kilometer march. That was the last time Elena ever heard from him.

Elena recalled that back in May, the whole regiment had been ordered to get foreign passports or face dismissal, indicating that recruits had been converted into contractors who were allowed to bring their civilian forms of identification with them. In Artyom's case, however, these passports were collected right before

<sup>239</sup> "Ukraine Liveblog Day 190," *The Interpreter*.

<sup>240</sup> "Russia This Week: Kremlin Advisor Speaks at Yalta Conference Amid Separatists, European Far Right (August 25–31)," August 30, 2014, *The Interpreter*, <http://www.interpretermag.com/russia-this-week/#4031>; Elena Racheva, "Look How Far Away Ukraine Is," *Novaya Gazeta*, August 28, 2014, <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/society/65022.html>.

<sup>241</sup> "Transcript of Interrogation of Russian Paratrooper Captured in Ukraine," *The Interpreter*, August 31, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/russia-this-week/#3949>.

the move into Ukraine. She also recalled that back on August 12, an officer had visited the regiment and told them that Ukrainians were shelling Russian Federation territory and that they had to be prepared; when she asked her husband if they were going to war, he said, “Oh, no, it’s just training.”

Elena told *Novaya Gazeta*’s Racheva that there were reports of as many as 250 killed out of some 300 deployed; she was unable to find her husband, and her mother-in-law had not been able to locate him at hospitals in Rostov.

After the news of the 10 POWs came out, people who had served with Artyom and relatives of other soldiers converged upon the regiment. There, Colonel Aleksandr Khotulev read out a list of casualties: two contract soldiers had died, and 10 had been wounded and taken to Rostov hospitals. Nine had been detained by the Ukrainians, and the tenth was in the emergency room. The colonel said that the men had gone into Ukrainian territory “by mistake” while “patrolling the border.” When asked why the soldiers had had to change into camouflage if they were only patrolling the border, the commander angrily replied: “The order came. Ask the Defense Ministry.”

Relatives of the POWs also described to *Novaya Gazeta* how they had been reviled on Russian social media and threatened that if they did not pick up their relatives, they would return home as “Cargo 200”—that is, dead. The commander explained that the POWs would be exchanged for Ukrainian POWs in due course.

In what was likely the first such demonstration since the outbreak of Russia’s war in Ukraine, relatives of the confirmed Kostroma POWs and those still looking for their missing loved ones—about 30 in all—decided to stage a picket at the army base on August 28, 2014.

One of the wives of a missing soldier received a phone call on August 27 from Russia’s General Prosecutor’s Office saying that the 300 soldiers were alive, were located in various cities, and would return—but it would take a while. The wife was ordered not to divulge any information, not to report her husband as a missing person, and not to attend any rallies. The other wives were also threatened and warned that they could face fines of 200,000 rubles (about \$3,000) for participating in unauthorized rallies and that their husbands could be jailed for divulging state secrets.

When Elena called the field camp in Rostov again, the officer she reached told her she was only making things worse for her husband, and that he would be killed just for talking to her. “What, Putin wanted to withdraw the troops quietly, and now he can’t?” asked Elena. “Yes,” she was told.

The women decided to demonstrate anyway, but without posters or banners. An officer named Albert Akhmerov clearly had no information but told them that none of the wounded or bodies of those killed were there, that there was no mobile connection to any of the soldiers, and that they should be proud of their husbands’ service to their country. He tried to reassure the wives, “Everything is fine with your husbands. As for wounds, they only have blisters.” He further shooed away a journalist from France’s Agence France-Presse (AFP) who had come to cover the demonstration, saying that the reporter was only “smearing Russia” and exploiting the women’s grief. Some of the wives then turned on the AFP reporter, urging him to leave. This followed a pattern typical for Russia, where military families keep silent when they are told that doing so might work out better for them.

But one wife, 26-year-old Valeriya Sokolova, did talk to AFP.<sup>242</sup> “Cargo 200 arrived yesterday,” she said, repeating reports that “several” soldiers had been killed and about 15 wounded flown back to Russia from Ukraine—this from the 300 originally deployed in August to the border. She said her husband had told her that the commanders had not said where they would be deployed but that some would ride in KamAZ trucks.

Later, 50 of the relatives, undeterred, gathered at the paratroopers’ staff headquarters and told journalists that they had last spoken to the men in the unit on August 23. Military officials finally agreed to see the relatives but first carefully checked all their passports and refused to release any lists of dead or wounded. The relatives were simply told the men were on “planned exercises.”

News soon trickled out that two coffins of those killed in action had arrived in Kostroma, but the names of the dead were not available. Ultimately, the list of names of those killed in this operation was not publicized, and the claims of those killed as ranging from more than “several” to as many as “250” could not be validated.

<sup>242</sup> “Army Wives Urge Russia to Come Clean on Soldiers in Ukraine,” AFP, August 28, 2014, <http://news.yahoo.com/army-wives-urge-russia-come-clean-soldiers-ukraine-185525694.html>.

## Soldiers' Mothers Go Public in Russia

After not receiving any answers to their private inquiries with military commanders, on August 26, Krivenko and Polyakova of the Presidential Council on Development of Civil Society and Human Rights sent an appeal to the military investigation division of the Investigative Committee of Russia, the chief criminal investigative body of Russia. The appeal, which contained a list of nine names of soldiers who were in the 18th Motorized Rifle Brigade (army unit 27777),<sup>243</sup> was also posted on the old website of the Presidential Council used by members (not part of the *Kremlin.ru* site), but including only the ranks and duties of the men from Dagestan, not their names. A copy was additionally sent to TV Rain, which published a list of the ranks, only with no names,<sup>244</sup> as well as a separate interview with Polyakova.<sup>245</sup>

Krivenko, who is also coordinator of the Citizen and Army civic movement, said that he had received dozens of appeals from the relatives of those who had been killed and had forwarded them to the Investigative Committee but received no response. TV Rain then published the full text of the appeal, which contained the list with names, on September 2, 2014.<sup>246</sup>

Prompted by the Soldiers' Mothers' inquiry, TV Rain decided to keep an ongoing list of its own. Given the enormous amount of official pressure and public harassment of both concerned relatives and groups

like the Soldiers' Mothers, the channel and other independent media began checking the information carefully and publishing all the cases they could verify.

Often described as “the last independent TV station in Russia,” TV Rain has long been persecuted for its critical reporting and faced a major challenge in January 2014 over a viewer survey it ran about attitudes toward the Siege of Leningrad.<sup>247</sup> In this incident, TV Rain hosts asked whether those surrounded by the Nazis might have been better off capitulating rather than starving to death. The survey triggered both real backlash and further frenzy whipped up by officials. Almost all cable operators ended up dropping the station. TV Rain was then told that its lease at the renovated Red Star factory would not be renewed. The station was forced to move its operations into an apartment.

Nevertheless, TV Rain stayed on the Cargo 200 story, first publishing the Soldiers' Mothers list of missing soldiers with their unit names only,<sup>248</sup> then its own list on August 30, followed by the Soldiers' Mothers list again with the full names on September 2. The station then updated the merged list until it reached 34 names,<sup>249</sup> with the last names being mainly the paratroopers killed in August during the now-infamous battle of Lutugino, where the BMD-2 was taken. TV Rain stopped updating the list, possibly because of the beating of their chief producer (see below). The list remains online, however.

<sup>243</sup> “Presidential Human Rights Council Members Appeal to Investigative Committee on Missing Soldiers,” *The Interpreter*, August 26, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/russia-this-week-demonstrators-against-war-in-ukraine-arrested/#4109>.

<sup>244</sup> “A Member of the Human Rights Council Will Check the Transport Information on 100 Wounded in St. Petersburg,” TV Rain, August 26, 2014, [http://tvrain.ru/news/chlen\\_soveta\\_po\\_pravam\\_cheloveka\\_pri\\_prezidente\\_soboschila\\_o\\_dostavke\\_100\\_ranenyh\\_v\\_peterburg-374580/](http://tvrain.ru/news/chlen_soveta_po_pravam_cheloveka_pri_prezidente_soboschila_o_dostavke_100_ranenyh_v_peterburg-374580/).

<sup>245</sup> Presidential Council on Development of Civil Society and Human Rights of the Russian Federation, “Members of the Council Have Asked the UK to Check the Data About the Death of Nine Russian Servicemen in the Rostov Region,” August 26, 2014, <http://old.president-sovet.ru/news/6875/>. The list was as follows: 1. sanitation instructor, private; 2. scout, private; 3. scout, private; 4. group commander, lieutenant; 5. senior scout, senior sergeant; 6. scout, grenade-thrower, private; 7. scout, sniper, private; 8. mine-layer, scout, private; 9. division commander, junior sergeant.

<sup>246</sup> “The Human Rights Council Sent a Copy of the Appeal to TV Rain in the UK with the Names of Missing Soldiers,” TV Rain, September 2, 2014, [http://tvrain.ru/articles/sovet\\_po\\_pravam\\_cheloveka\\_peredal\\_dozhdju\\_kopiju\\_obraschenija\\_v\\_sk\\_s\\_imenami\\_propavshih\\_soldat-374887/](http://tvrain.ru/articles/sovet_po_pravam_cheloveka_peredal_dozhdju_kopiju_obraschenija_v_sk_s_imenami_propavshih_soldat-374887/). The list was as follows: 1. Rakhman Ramzanovich Dargiev, born 1976, sanitary instructor, private; 2. Khizir Khuseynovich Ibragimov, born 1984, scout, private; 3. Magomed Khizirovich Midayev, born 1984, scout, private; 4. Vladimir Vasilyevich Fyodorov, born 1981, group commander, lieutenant; 5. Arbi Umaltayevich Misirbayev, born 1978, senior scout, senior sergeant; 6. Ibragim Said-Aminovich Zakayev, born 1981, scout, grenade-thrower, private; 7. Mayrabek Makhmatsultanovich Makhmatkhaov, born 1979, sniper scout, private; 8. Abdulkhakim Bayramaliyevich Aliyev, born 1990, sniper scout, private; 9. Ismail Solmanovich Nazirov, born 1967, division commander, junior sergeant.

<sup>247</sup> “Prosecutor Launches Probe of TV Rain,” translation of article originally published by *Lenta.ru* on January 30, 2014, *The Interpreter*, January 31, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/prosecutor-launches-probe-of-tv-rain/>.

<sup>248</sup> They were: 1. 98th Svirsk Division of the Airborne Troops—10 captured (9 POWs in Kiev, 1 in St. Petersburg hospital); 2. 17th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade, Army Unit 65384—1 dead; 3. 31st Guard Kutuzov Order II Degree Separate Assault Paratrooper Brigade, Army Unit 73612—2 dead, 2 held in Donetsk Region; 4. 9th Separate Vislenskaya Motorized Brigade Army Unit 54046—2 dead; 5. 76th Assault Guards Chernigov Red Banner Division of Pskov—4 dead, 1 incommunicado; 6. 18th Separate Guard Motorized Evpatoria Red Banner Brigade—2 dead.

<sup>249</sup> <http://tvrain.ru/soldat/>.

## Soldiers' Mothers Vilified by Blogger

On August 28, the well-known and controversial Russian-language video blogger Anatoly Shariy, formerly a Ukrainian citizen who now lives in Europe, denounced the Soldiers' Mothers story about the Dagestani soldiers as fake. To discredit them, he purported to have found police records and a criminal history related to the group. He also made much of discovering a grant of \$84,966 issued to the Soldiers' Mothers of St. Petersburg by the National Endowment for Democracy, a U.S. congressionally funded aid organization. (NED officials had removed once-open reports of Russian grantees precisely because of harassment by people such as Shariy; the information is available in the Internet Archive, however.<sup>250</sup>)

Shariy thus tried to associate the Soldiers' Mothers with the war in Iraq and the "liars" in the Bush administration. Yet the Soldiers' Mothers 2011 grant dealt only with domestic affairs and was used for seminars on legal issues related to the draft. Such activities are still currently legal under Russia law, and carrying them out with the support of a foreign grant was also legal at the time. The law signed by Putin that imposed stiff fines on organizations engaged in vaguely defined "political activity" resting on the receipt of grants from abroad was only passed in 2013.

Shariy was at first treated by many observers as an even-handed critic of both Russia and Ukraine. He exposed the "toddler crucifixion" hoax perpetrated by Russia's TV1, for example, which falsely accused Ukrainian troops of crucifying a three-year-old boy in front of his terrified mother after taking back Slavyansk from the separatists. Yet most of Shariy's criticism is directed at Ukraine, and his method often includes providing a welter of details and expert-sounding commentary, delivered in the cynical tone that attracts many viewers on YouTube.

With this denunciation of the Soldiers' Mothers, however, he was revealed as an instrument of the Kremlin's interests, trying to smear the Soldiers' Mothers as American agents even as they tried to uncover information about Russians who had died serv-

ing their country, albeit under dubious circumstances. Shariy also never addressed the group's legitimate concerns about the Dagestani servicemen killed.

Moreover, on August 29, RIA Novosti reported that the Ministry of Justice had registered the St. Petersburg Soldiers' Mothers as a "foreign agent," although the organization did not currently have any active grants from abroad.<sup>251</sup> That reinforced the sense that Shariy's "exposé" was part of an officially orchestrated attack, especially given the appearance of other attacks on social media.<sup>252</sup>

RIA Novosti said that the Soldiers' Mothers had provided no comment but revealed that Anatoly Artyukh—a Russian Orthodox activist and aide to the conservative St. Petersburg deputy Vitaly Milonov, known for his anti-gay diatribes—had appealed to the FSB and Prosecutor's Office to inspect the St. Petersburg Soldiers' Mothers for "foreign agent" status. Artyukh said the Soldiers' Mothers were providing consultation to "youths who wish to dodge the draft" and "deserters," as well as legal assistance, roundtables, and seminars "for money from abroad"—all while failing to register as a "foreign agent" under the new NGO law.

## Meeting of Defense Ministry and Soldiers' Mothers

The first cautious publication of the Soldier's Mothers appeal by TV Rain, coupled with activists' repeated requests, succeeded in getting the group a meeting with Russian Defense Ministry and Army officials, despite the fact that on August 29, they had been registered as "foreign agents."<sup>253</sup> It appears that, although Defense Ministry spokesmen in Moscow continued to stonewall journalists on the issue of Russian troops fighting in Ukraine, a decision was made at the top level to attempt to mollify these particularly vocal figures who also had the added prestige of membership in the Presidential Council for Human Rights.

Nikolai Pankov and Ruslan Tsalkikov, deputy ministers of defense, and Sergei Prigorov, director of the Defense Ministry's Department of Housing, agreed to meet with the group of human rights advocates, which

<sup>250</sup> See <https://web.archive.org/web/20150720104843/http://www.ned.org/publications/annual-reports/2011-annual-report/eurasia/russia>.

<sup>251</sup> "Ukraine Conflict: Russian Families Look for Soldier Sons," BBC Russian, August 28, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-28968526>; Ministry of Justice, "Russian Ministry of Justice Added to Registry of Non-Profit Organizations Performing Foreign-Agent Functions," <http://minjust.ru/ru/press/news/minyustom-rossii-vneseny-dopolneniya-v-reestr-nekommercheskih-organizaciy-1>.

<sup>252</sup> "Soldiers' Mothers of St. Petersburg Declared 'Foreign Agent' After Query of Deaths in Ukraine," *The Interpreter*, <http://www.interpretermag.com/russia-this-week/#4035>.

<sup>253</sup> "Russian Defense Ministry Meets with Soldiers' Mothers, Human Rights Advocates," *The Interpreter*, <http://www.interpretermag.com/russia-this-week-demonstrators-against-war-in-ukraine-arrested/#4110>.



included Mikhail Fedotov, chairman of the Presidential Council; and Council members Mariya Bolshakova, Irina Kirkora, and Sergei Krivenko.<sup>254</sup>

The meeting was cordial enough, but no progress was made on getting answers to previous inquiries about missing soldiers. Pankov noted the importance of the work of the Presidential Human Rights Council as a mediator between the ministry and civil society, and the Defense Ministry tried to placate concerns by announcing a new mass campaign aimed at urging soldiers to call their mothers. On August 31 and September 1, the ministry sent text messages to hundreds of thousands of soldiers throughout Russia, reading, “Remember your first steps to school. Call your mom.” (September 1 is the first day of school in Russia.)

With this gambit, Russian defense officials sought to equate the very real concerns of relatives of deceased soldiers with the overwrought, if understandable, panic of parents about not getting phone calls from busy children. This macabre distraction failed to gain attention in mainstream or social media outlets; if it had, it might have been ridiculed.

Almost playfully, given the context in which the “Call Mama” campaign was announced, Pankov at the meeting noted the difficulty of working under the conditions of an “information war” (here, he meant one perpetrated by Ukraine and the West against Russia, and not the systemic campaign of invention and falsification that has characterized the Russian state media’s portrayal of events) and urged the activists to appeal to him first after receiving reports of the violation of soldiers’ rights in order to get the most rapid response.

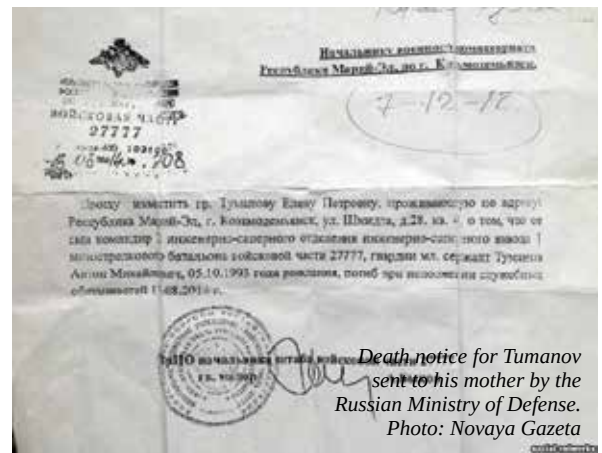
The members of the Presidential Council meanwhile proposed creating a joint working group with the Defense Ministry to facilitate the verification of all of the alarming reports about dead or missing Russian soldiers. Unsurprisingly, this initiative never got off the ground.

## Activists’ Interview with Reuters

On September 12, 2014, as attacks on critics escalated, Reuters Ukraine correspondents Thomas Grove and Maria Tsvetkova published an interview with



Russian soldier Anton Tumanov in Rostov Region, July 19, 2014. Photo: VKontakte



Death notice for Tumanov sent to his mother by the Russian Ministry of Defense. Photo: Novaya Gazeta

Krivenko and Polyakova.<sup>255</sup>

In speaking with Reuters, the activists were following a template long used by Soviet-era dissidents, as well as modern Russian human rights advocates. First, they tried solving the problem quietly, as officials had warned that it would “get worse for them” if they publicized it. Next, they tried their own outlets and, eventually, local and national media. Finally, they tried meeting with Defense Ministry officials. Eventually, they took the cause to international press in order to give it more resonance—and possibly stem the tide of harassment by giving it publicity.

In the Reuters interview, Krivenko described the case of Anton Tumanov, which had already been covered by the *Kyiv Post* and was based on an account given by his mother, Elena Tumanova, to Krivenko’s

<sup>254</sup> Also participating in the meeting were Valentina Melnikova, head of the Union of Committees of Soldiers’ Mothers; Igor Yevtushenko of the Center for Military Civilian Cooperation; Vera Teslenko, advisor to the Department of Servicemen’s Rights Defense of the Russian Federation Ombudsman’s Office; Mikhail Davidenko, an expert from the Russian Federation Ombudsman’s Office; and Sergei Yermolenko, head of Officers of Russia, a center for the defense of the rights of officers and their families.

<sup>255</sup> Thomas Grove and Maria Tsvetkova, “Special Report: Moscow Stifles Dissent as Soldiers Return in Coffins,” Reuters, September 12, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/09/12/us-ukraine-crisis-russians-special-repor-idUSKBN0H70S920140912>.



Opposition demonstrators stage the Peace March against the war in Ukraine.  
Photo: Ilya Pitalev / TASS



organization.

“Medical documents said there were shrapnel wounds. That is, he died from a loss of blood, but how it happened and where were not indicated,” Krivenko said. Tumanova could not be reached for comment, but a fellow soldier—whose first name was only given as “Rolan”—was wounded in the same battle as Tumanov and said that the latter had died in surgery after being struck by shrapnel.

## Muted Public Response

As Reuters commented, “The fact that Russian soldiers have died in a war in which they officially have no involvement is a problem in Russia. Chatter about young soldiers returning home in coffins has begun to

spread over the past few weeks. Though still limited, such talk has powerful echoes of earlier Russian wars such as Chechnya and Afghanistan.”<sup>256</sup>

In August and early September 2014, large opposition antiwar rallies were held in Moscow and St. Petersburg (an earlier March 2014 rally was held against the annexation of Crimea). While no doubt in part spurred by reports of Russian soldiers being killed,<sup>257</sup> protests specifically geared toward the cover-up of their deaths were not a prominent part of the demonstrations, as there was more focus on the more than 3,000 Ukrainian civilians killed in the war by that time.<sup>258</sup>

These rallies attracted mainly the Moscow or St. Petersburg middle classes, principally figures from the liberal intelligentsia and the opposition—in

<sup>256</sup> Grove and Tsvetkova, “Special Report.”

<sup>257</sup> “26,000 Protest War in Ukraine at Moscow Peace March,” *The Interpreter*, <http://www.interpretermag.com/russia-this-week-rights-or-revanchism-russian-human-rights-commissioner-blasts-ukraine-baltic-states/>. See also “Thousands March Against War in Moscow, St. Petersburg,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, August 29, 2015, <http://www.rferl.org/content/russia-antiwar-marches-ukraine/26597971.html>.

<sup>258</sup> “Ukraine Death Toll Edges Up Despite Ceasefire, More POWs Freed,” Reuters, September 9, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/09/09/us-ukraine-crisis-idUSKBN0H40M820140909>.

other words, Russians who were not losing sons in a hushed-up war in the Donbass. That group was mainly composed of poor provincial families for whom military service was often the only job in town, but other than the picket by relatives of POWs in Kostroma and some small rallies in Ekaterinburg and Barnaul, no major protests were held in Russia's provinces, and official media never mentioned the activists' appeal to the Russian Defense Ministry or their meeting with military officials. About 250 people turned up in St. Petersburg, where the injured soldiers had been brought and where the local wing of the Soldiers' Mothers had been particularly outspoken,<sup>259</sup> but they were detained by police. One lone picketer also protested the war near Red Square; pictures by independent reporters posted to social media show him being choked by police and shoved into a police van, an outcome that may have deterred others from protesting.<sup>260</sup> Another lone protester picketed in Yekaterinburg.<sup>261</sup>

Furthermore, the March 2015 rally to protest Russia's invasion of Ukraine—and a sagging economy brought about in part by U.S. and European Union sanctions against Russia—was tragically turned into a funeral march for its organizer, the opposition leader and former deputy prime minister Boris Nemtsov, who was assassinated days earlier (see below).

In other words, the Western expectation that Russia might be led into altering its course or have to confront rising popular resentment about a costly act of foreign adventurism—a grassroots revolt tantamount to those that attended the United States' wars in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan—simply has not occurred in Russia. Authorities there are very good at suppressing dissent, and the independent media audience is very small in a country where the vast majority of the population still acquires its “news” from state-controlled television.

## Arrest of Stavropol Soldiers' Mothers Leader Ludmila Bogatenkova

Russian authorities were not content to silence

the media or wear them out with the demands of fact-checking or counter-propaganda; they decided to move against the most vocal of the activists pursuing Cargo 200 cases. Their feigned cooperation with the Soldiers' Mothers quickly evaporated.

On October 18, 2014, Ludmila Bogatenkova, chair of the Mothers of Prikumya, was brought before a judge in Budyonnovsk on charges of fraud.<sup>262</sup> An ambulance was called to the courtroom during the hearing, which was halted. Bogatenkova, now 74, is a registered disabled person, and it is believed that she became ill in court.

The next day, October 19, 2014, the hearing resumed, and the court ordered her arrest pending trial on fraud charges based on claims that she had taken money from recruits with the promise of helping them avoid the draft. The charges were not substantiated, and later the man who gave evidence against her said he had been asked by the FSB to support fake claims against Bogatenkova as retaliation against her publicization of the cases of soldiers killed in Ukraine. She was released from pretrial detention after protests.

On July 1, 2015, a judge acquitted Bogatenkova on one charge and reduced the severity of a second, issuing a one-year suspended sentence before immediately granting her amnesty.<sup>263</sup> Even so, the sentence continues to hang over her head as a deterrent to speaking out and risking re-arrest.

## Reprisals Against Journalists

All journalists who have attempted to investigate or publicize the Cargo 200 cases in Ukraine from inside Russia have met with the severest reprisals, sometimes in the form of direct threats from local officials, but more often through unofficial threats or physical attacks.

## Assault of TV Rain Producer

On September 12, 10 days after TV Rain published the first complaint from the St. Petersburg Soldiers' Mothers about servicemen reported to have been killed in Ukraine, Ksenya Batanova, TV Rain's chief

<sup>259</sup> “Anti-War Rally in St. Petersburg,” *The Interpreter*, August 30, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/russia-this-week/#4048>.

<sup>260</sup> “Anti-War Protesters Arrested in Moscow for Candlelight Vigil,” *The Interpreter*, September 6, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/russia-this-week-demonstrators-against-war-in-ukraine-arrested/#4070>.

<sup>261</sup> “Lone Anti-War Pickets in Moscow, Yekaterinburg,” September 7, 2014, *The Interpreter*, <http://www.interpretermag.com/russia-this-week-demonstrators-against-war-in-ukraine-arrested/#4069>.

<sup>262</sup> “Soldiers' Mothers Activist Arrested, Had Pressed Cases of Russian Soldiers in Killed in Ukraine,” *The Interpreter*, October 19, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/russia-this-week-hundreds-of-russians-poisoned-25-dead-in-spice-drug-epidemic/#4662>.

<sup>263</sup> Halya Coynash, “Court Convicts Rights Activist Who Probed Russian Soldiers' Deaths in Ukraine,” Kharkiv Committee on Human Rights, <http://khpg.org/index.php?id=1435864629>.

producer and anchor, was assaulted near her home by unidentified persons who struck her multiple times in the face.<sup>264</sup> She lost consciousness and was hospitalized with a concussion and facial fractures. The attack was similar to that suffered by Lev Shlosberg in Pskov, and there was reason to wonder whether it was reprisal for TV Rain's attempt to report on the issue of Russian soldiers killed in Ukraine; Batanova had recently interviewed war photographer Viktoriya Ivleva about Andrei Panasyuk, the Ukrainian POW filmed by RIA Novosti photographer Andrei Stenin, who was killed in Ukraine. Yet some significant differences in this case—in Shlosberg's case, for example, no valuables were taken, whereas Batanova's assailants took jewelry and her cell phone—led TV Rain to refrain from reporting the attack until September 14 and to remain unsure that the beating was intended as reprisal for their reporting.

Ultimately, TV Rain did not comment further on whether they believed this attack was related to their work and specifically the Cargo 200 issue. But after this date, the work on the list of soldiers killed slowed down and eventually stopped altogether.

## Attack on BBC Crew

The BBC's Moscow correspondent, Steve Rosenberg, reported that he and his team were attacked in Astrakhan while investigating reports of Russian soldiers being killed near the border with Ukraine.<sup>265</sup> At least three thugs grabbed their camera, smashed it, and knocked a cameraman to the ground. The journalists reported the attack but then were interrogated by police for four hours; later they found that their equipment had been tampered with, and the hard drives and memory cards were wiped clean.

While there have been attacks on foreign journalists in past years in Russia, and even an assassination, this attack was the first time during the Ukrainian war that foreign journalists were physically attacked in Russia.

Rosenberg reported that he and his crew were

attacked after interviewing Oksana, the sister of Konstantin Kuzmin, a Russian professional soldier who was killed after being recalled from leave and sent to the Ukrainian border. Kuzmin had rung home on July 26, 2014, telling his family that he was headed to Ukraine. He reportedly sounded fearful. On August 17, 2014, Kuzmin's family was informed by a military commissar that he had been killed by a Ukrainian shell landing on Russian territory. Oksana said that the commissar himself admitted that he did not believe this story.

After interviewing Oksana, the BBC team set off toward Astrakhan. Upon leaving her village, they were stopped by traffic police, who checked their trunk and IDs. The attack occurred shortly thereafter.

## Attack on Lev Shlosberg

On August 29, 2014—the same day that the St. Petersburg Soldiers' Mothers were publicly branded as “foreign agents”—Lev Shlosberg, a deputy in the Pskov Region legislature from the opposition Yabloko Party, was attacked by two unidentified assailants about 400 meters from his home.<sup>266</sup> The attackers appeared unaware that Shlosberg had arranged to meet a friend outside his home and ran away when they saw him coming. That person was able to summon an ambulance. Shlosberg was hospitalized with a concussion, a fractured nose, and multiple bruises, the press secretary of Yabloko reported.<sup>267</sup>

Shlosberg himself linked his attack to his work in exposing the deaths of Pskov paratroopers.<sup>268</sup> Not only had he raised the issue as an opposition legislator, but he had published material in the *Pskovskaya Guberniya*, a local newspaper and website that he had founded.

Acting Pskov Region Governor Andrei Turchak issued a statement condemning the attack and pledging to take the investigation “under his personal supervision,” but the attackers were never found.

Turchak, a conservative governor loyal to the ruling

<sup>264</sup> “TV Rain's Chief Producer Assaulted in Moscow,” *The Interpreter*, <http://www.interpretermag.com/russia-this-week-further-reports-of-russian-paratroopers-killed-in-ukraine/#4258>.

<sup>265</sup> “BBC Team Under Attack in Southern Russia,” BBC World, September 18, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-29249642>. Rosenberg then published a longer report, “Ukraine Crisis: Forgotten Death of Russian Soldiers,” BBC Europe, September 18, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-29249643>. See also “Ukraine Liveblog Day 213: BBC Team Attacked in Russia While Investigating Soldiers' Deaths in Ukraine,” *The Interpreter*, September 18, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-213-bbc-team-attacked-in-russia-while-investigating-soldiers-deaths-in-ukraine/#4300>.

<sup>266</sup> “Lev Shlosberg, Pskov Deputy Who Probed Pskov Paratroopers' Deaths, Assaulted, Hospitalized,” *The Interpreter*, August 29, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/russia-this-week/#4038>; and “Shlosberg Recovering, Links Attack to His Investigation of Paratroopers' Deaths in Ukraine,” *The Interpreter*, August 29, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/russia-this-week/#4047>.

<sup>267</sup> See <https://www.facebook.com/ig.yakovlev/posts/843905768953572>.

<sup>268</sup> “Shlosberg Recovering,” *The Interpreter*.



United Russia Party, had previously been the target of Shlosberg's criticism and had accused Shlosberg of being a "fifth columnist" in May 2014 when Shlosberg first exposed the deployment of Pskov's 76th Guards in Crimea. Shlosberg had nevertheless continued to criticize the war in Ukraine as well as mismanagement in Pskov Region.

Back in 2010, Oleg Kashin, a former *Kommersant* journalist and blogger who suffered a serious assault that left him in a coma with multiple broken limbs, theorized that Turchak could have been behind his attack "because of his ties to the Kremlin."<sup>269</sup> That hypothesis raised the question of whether Turchak had ordered the attack on Shlosberg as well, and suspicions increased when Kashin announced on his website on September 7 that Russia's Investigative Committee had detained and charged three suspects in the attack who worked for the security department of a company owned by Turchak's family.<sup>270</sup>

## Russia Tries a "Limited Hangout" on News of Soldiers Killed

After intimidation, threats, and bizarre non sequiturs failed to stop the slow leakage of incriminating evidence about Russia's war, the Kremlin decided to try a "limited hangout" on the Cargo 200 issue. This phrase is taken from intelligence jargon popularized during the Watergate scandal; it refers to an attempt by officials to disclose at least *some* of the truth in order to dissuade further inquiries and prevent the outing of the whole story.

In an August 28 report, TV1 quoted separatist leader Aleksandr Zakharchenko saying that there were Russian "volunteers" fighting in Ukraine (see above) by acknowledging that they were dying in Ukraine, too. On September 5, 2014, Russian state television went even further toward acknowledging the Russian military presence in Ukraine, airing a segment about Anatoly Travkin and Sergei Zhdanovich of Kostroma, who, the channel said, had gone to fight in Donbass of

their own accord.<sup>271</sup> The program sought to portray the soldiers as idealists who had sacrificed the comforts of home to help their fellow Russians abroad. Mikhail Kozlov, an Airborne Troops veteran, commented to TV1 how "sad" it was "that we are losing young people" but stated that he was proud that they had followed "the call of their heart" to "fulfill their obligations." Zhdanovich's widow was cited as saying that her husband "had done what a real man must do. We really miss him. But for the rest of our lives we will be proud of him."

On September 10, all state TV channels featured Putin's visit to the Russian Orthodox church on Vorobyovy Gory (Sparrow Hills) and his lighting of a candle "for those who gave their lives for Novorossiya"<sup>272</sup>—a vague allusion to the Russian soldiers who died in Ukraine for the "Novorossiya" cause.

Taken together, these two instances indicate that the Russian government was perhaps trying to "prepare public opinion," as propagandists say, especially in the face of rising visible opposition discontent. On September 21, 2014, the Russian opposition organized a large antiwar march in which an estimated 26,000 people took part.<sup>273</sup> Moscow authorities had issued a permit to avoid the challenge of an unsanctioned rally, but they sought to downplay it anyway. The demonstration was covered only sparsely by state wire services.

## Putin Issues Awards to Army Units for "Heroism and Bravery in Combat"

On March 25, 2015, Putin issued the honorary title of "guards" to three units: the 11th and 83rd Air Assault Brigades and the 38th Communications Regiment. The text of the citation stated: "For massive heroism and bravery, determination and courage, displayed by the personnel of the brigades in combat actions in defense of the Fatherland and state interests under conditions of armed conflicts, and taking into

<sup>269</sup> Oleg Kashin, "A Beating on My Beat," *New York Times*, December 11, 2010. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/12/opinion/12Kashin.html>

<sup>270</sup> "Russia Charges Three Suspects over 2010 Attack on Reporter Oleg Kashin," Committee to Protect Journalists, September 9, 2015, <https://cpj.org/2015/09/russia-charges-three-suspects-over-2010-attack-on-oleg-kashin/>

<sup>271</sup> "In Kostroma a Farewell to Anatoly Travkin, Paratrooper Who Was Killed in Combat in Eastern Ukraine," TV1, September 4, 2014, <http://www.1tv.ru/news/social/266969>. See also "Russian Propaganda Begins to Mold the Characters of Those Marines Killed in Ukraine (VIDEO)," *Novy Region*, September 5, 2014, [http://nr2.com.ua/News/world\\_and\\_russia/Rossiyskaya-propaganda-prinyalas-lepit-geroev-iz-ubityh-v-Ukraine-desantnikov-79316.html](http://nr2.com.ua/News/world_and_russia/Rossiyskaya-propaganda-prinyalas-lepit-geroev-iz-ubityh-v-Ukraine-desantnikov-79316.html).

<sup>272</sup> "Putin Lights Candles in Church 'For Those Who Gave Their Lives to Novorossiya,'" *The Interpreter*, <http://www.interpretermag.com/russia-this-week-further-reports-of-russian-paratroopers-killed-in-ukraine/#4221>.

<sup>273</sup> "Peace March of 26,000 in Moscow Finishes Without Incident; A Few Arrests Reported," *The Interpreter*, <http://www.interpretermag.com/russia-this-week-rights-or-revanchism-russian-human-rights-commissioner-blasts-ukraine-baltic-states/>.

account its merits in peace time.”

Although the place and time of these combat actions were not indicated in the decrees, the question was raised as to whether the units had fought in Ukraine. This move by the Kremlin seemed to be another example of an effort to stem the tide of concern regarding killed or missing soldiers and appeared to be calculated to stress the glory of a combat death in service to the state.

Putin’s spokesman Dmitry Peskov denied that the honored units had fought in Ukraine and claimed that their citations had been earned in the Soviet period or in the Caucasus. But InformNapalm, an independent site that investigates Russian armed conflict in the Eurasian region, said that it had covered the presence of these units in Ukraine in 2014, before the Donetsk Airport and Debaltsevo battles were lost by the Ukrainian armed forces.<sup>274</sup>

On January 20, 2015, InformNapalm blogger Irakly Komakhidze had written that, according to information from activists in Buryatiya, Russia, a flight with “Cargo 200” had arrived in January 2015 in the Buryat Republic’s capital of Ulan-Ude.<sup>275</sup> According to local reports, this flight contained the coffins of 20 Russian soldiers from Buryatiya who were in the 11th Separate Assault Guards Brigade of the Airborne Troops and had been deployed in Rostov with paratroopers from the 76th Guards Air Assault Division of Pskov as part of a mixed division or battalion tactical group that suffered heavy losses from Ukrainian artillery. In these cases, as with other soldiers, the servicemen had been discharged from the regular army and evidently then signed contracts as volunteers.

This article also reported that soldiers in the 5th Tank Brigade in Ulan-Ude, who had also been deployed in mass numbers to Rostov, had rebelled and torn up their contracts. “Not in a single unit in the [Russian Federation] has such a massive refusal to fight against Ukraine occurred,” Komakhidze wrote.

InformNapalm’s information is difficult to verify, however, because no names of deceased soldiers are given, nor are links to social media or news accounts of grieving relatives or funerals. Indeed, Dorzhi Ba-

tomunkuyev, the severely burned Buryat tank gunner from the 5th Brigade, mentioned no such protest in his extensive interview with *Novaya Gazeta*’s Elena Kostyuchenko (see below).

## Putin’s Decree Banning Disclosure of Casualties During “Special Operations”

On May 18, 2015, Putin signed a decree, published on the official portal of the Russian government, making it a crime to disclose military casualties from “special operations” during peacetime and classifying such information as secret.<sup>276</sup> Disclosure of information classified as a state secret is punishable under Article 283 of the Russian Criminal Code with up to seven years in prison. The intent of this law is clearly to prevent reporting on Russian military casualties in Ukraine.

The wonder was that Putin had not passed such a decree earlier. In the week prior to its issuance, a group of Russian bloggers reported in detail on three GRU *Spetsnaz* soldiers killed in Ukraine, which may have been the motivation for the timing (see below).

A lawyers’ organization called Team 29 quickly appealed the decree, arguing that Article 5 of the federal Law on State Secrecy does not provide for classification of the losses of military personnel in peacetime, and that Article 7 says that information about emergencies and disasters threatening public safety and health cannot be classified. A group of lawyers, journalists, and activists joined the suit, including war correspondents Arkady Babchenko, Timur Olevsky, Pavel Kanygin, and Vladimir Voronov; environmental activist Grigory Pasko; Pskov legislator Lev Shlosberg; blogger Ruslan Leviev; and Svetlana Davydova, a mother of seven who had been charged with treason and arrested for informing the Ukrainian Embassy that troops had left the barracks near her home in Vyazma and that she had overheard a soldier say they were going to Ukraine. She was eventually released and the charges against her dropped.<sup>277</sup> On August 13,

<sup>274</sup> “InformNapalm and Igor Sutyagin Report That Russian Army Units Honored by Putin Fought in Ukraine,” *The Interpreter*, March 30, 2015, <http://www.interpretermag.com/russia-update-march-30-2015/#7716>.

<sup>275</sup> Irakly Komakhidze “Twenty Cargo 200s Delivered to Ulan-Ude,” InformNapalm, January 20, 2015, <https://informnapalm.org/4672-v-ulan-ude-dostavyly-20-200-h>.

<sup>276</sup> “Putin Signs Law Making it Crime to Report Military Losses from ‘Special Operations’ During Peacetime,” *The Interpreter*, May 28, 2015, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-live-day-465-one-killed-one-injured-after-explosion-in-kyiv/#8533>.

<sup>277</sup> “All the Strange Things Going on in Moscow,” *The Interpreter*, <http://www.interpretermag.com/russia-this-week-all-the-strange-things-going-on-in-moscow/>.



the Constitutional Court ruled that Putin's decree was legal.<sup>278</sup>

Thus, with threats against relatives that they would lose their social benefits if they kept protesting or talking to the press; the physical attacks on provincial politician Lev Shlosberg, and on TV and print reporters from TV Rain, *Novaya Gazeta*, the BBC, and others; the declaration of the St. Petersburg Soldiers' Mothers as "foreign agents"; the assassination of opposition leader Boris Nemtsov on the eve of a major antiwar march; the ban on disclosure of military casualties during "special operations," punishable by imprisonment; and finally the failure of litigation by liberal lawyers and journalists trying to work within the system, the Kremlin's "Chinese menu" form of suppressing dissent was complete. Every single category of citizen and every means of advocacy or protest had been harshly discouraged.

## The Limits of Mining Social Media for Cases of Russian Soldiers Killed in Ukraine

One of the most common methods by which Russian soldiers killed in Ukraine are found is by trawling pro-separatist groups and forums on VKontakte, the most popular Russian social network, and then branching out to see the individual's own account and the list of his friends. Such material can be difficult to verify, and as is always the case on social media, the capacity for deception or misunderstanding is great. People in paramilitary or veterans' groups who appear in photos in uniform and with arms may be delivering "humanitarian aid" to the Donbass but are not necessarily combatants.<sup>279</sup> Fake names or only a first name and a patronymic are often used, and sometimes people post photos that do not depict their own experience, but that of their friends. The geotagging feature of VKontakte can be helpful for finding soldiers in Ukraine, but it is not entirely accurate or reliable.

Some of the entries in lists of war dead have been made on the basis of searches conducted on VKontakte or other social media pages using names in

combination with the stock condolence phrases typical in Russian culture, such as *Skorbim, lyubim, pomnim* ("We grieve, we love, we remember") or *Tsartsvo emu nebesnoye* ("May the kingdom of heaven be his") or *Pust' zemlya budet emu pukhom* ("Let the earth be his pillow")—all phrases only used for deaths.

While anyone can mine VKontakte from their desk anywhere and find what seem like compelling data and pictures, and the independent media, mainly based in Moscow and St. Petersburg, can then attempt to check the facts and give the news a wider audience, it is local reporters, who in some cases know the soldiers themselves or their families, who have turned up the most validated cases, sometimes at great risk to themselves, given their lack of the greater protections afforded reporters in the capital. Local reporters have definitely confirmed deaths using family statements and visits to cemeteries; they have also confirmed that some soldiers claimed deceased are still alive.

For example, when the Ukrainian journalist Roman Bochkala reported on the captured BMD-2 in Lutugino, he said that Nikolai Krygin, one of the soldiers whose presence was indicated from a passport found at the scene, was "born in 1994" and was typical of the young, raw recruits thrown into the war. He was also listed as having died in battle by the website *Gruz200.net*.<sup>280</sup> But a local news account said that Krygin had served in the Chechen wars and therefore couldn't have been that young; he was also reported to be still alive.

Krygin's page on VKontakte and pictures on his wall<sup>281</sup> seemed to indicate he was still alive, although there have been cases in which family members have accessed the accounts of those killed and continued to post pictures. In the case of Krygin, however, he was shown updating his account as of June 20, 2015, and his profile included photos of him in the typical striped sleeveless t-shirt and blue beret of the VDV, in a scene with parachutes. His last photo with a rifle was in March 2015.

A local Pskov news site said that he was in fact alive,<sup>282</sup> demonstrating that it was not a case of two soldiers with the same name and displaying a picture of his passport from the Ukrainian military experts'

<sup>278</sup> "Russian Federation Supreme Court Pronounces Lawful Defense Ministry's Classification of Casualties," Russian Agency for Legal and Judicial News, "VS RF priznal zakonnyy zaskrechivaniye poter' Minoborony," August 13, 2015, [http://rapsnews.ru/judicial\\_news/20150813/274413316.html](http://rapsnews.ru/judicial_news/20150813/274413316.html).

<sup>279</sup> "Does Social Media Prove That Russian Law-Enforcers Are Fighting in Ukraine?" *The Interpreter*, January 7, 2015, <http://www.interpretermag.com/russia-update-large-russian-military-staging-ground-detected-near-ukrainian-border/#6089>.

<sup>280</sup> "Nikolai Krygin," *Russian Soldiers and Mercenaries Killed, Captured, Missing, Seen in Ukraine*, <http://gruz200.net/?n=5>.

<sup>281</sup> See <http://vk.com/id34937361> and [http://vk.com/wall80851728\\_1933](http://vk.com/wall80851728_1933).

<sup>282</sup> "Missing Paratrooper Nikolai Krygin—Alive!" *Kuryyer*, September 9, 2014, <http://www.province.ru/pskov/news/item/1347>.

site inforest.org, which had claimed in September 2014 that Krygin was among the Pskov paratroopers who had invaded Ukraine in August 2014 and were killed in battle.

The site reported that in September 2014, Krygin had called his relatives to say he was fine, although he remained on the list of those killed. A photo posted on VKontakte on December 5, 2014, shows him in uniform carrying a giant imitation rifle made of logs, with the comment “Punishment for a lost machine gun.”<sup>283</sup>

The appearance of one such mistaken report, however, can call into question other confirmations of those killed. Oleg Konstantinov, a journalist for *Kuryyer*, a local news site in Pskov, on September 2, 2014, re-confirmed that the three paratroopers buried in the cemetery in Vybuta were in fact buried,<sup>284</sup> but questions remained as he pursued the other cases.

A *Kuryyer* reader, Elvina A. (only her first name and last initial were given), contacted the news site to say that she had seen “dozens” of both open and closed caskets near a boiler room and some trash bins in Pskov and was totally shocked. The newspaper sent reporters out to look up and down the street, but they saw nothing. They then contacted the company that removed the trash; workers confirmed they had seen the coffins but then refused to say anything more.

While these findings underscore the limitations of using social media, accounts on VKontakte and other Russian social media are an important source of tips on Russians killed in action in Ukraine and could be used more than they have been by both regional and international journalists. The price of attempting to go offline and follow up on claims inside Russia is high, however; Steven Rosenberg of the BBC suffered an attack on his camera crew while engaged in such an effort (see above), and *Vice* journalist Simon Ostrovsky, a war correspondent from Ukraine, was kidnapped by fighters from the self-proclaimed Donetsk People’s Republic; he was later released but then denied a visa to Russia after he went to Vladivostok to find a soldier who had taken a selfie during the battle of Debaltsevo.<sup>285</sup>

As the independent media began to back off

from Cargo 200 cases and NGOs grew increasingly cautious after the declaration of the St. Petersburg Soldiers’ Mothers as “foreign agents,” bloggers increased their efforts to mine VKontakte and other Russian social media for indications of soldiers who had been killed.

A typical case was that of Sergei Vorobyev of the city of Kotlas-Koryazhma,<sup>286</sup> whose VKontakte profile shows a photo of him wearing camouflage with a “Novorossiia” flag and a walkie-talkie in the woods in winter—and posts from various friends expressing their condolences.<sup>287</sup> Vorobyev’s profile says he had “liberal” political views and describes his worldview as “pagan.” He belonged to pro-separatist and military VKontakte groups.

The most extensive account of Vorobyev’s death comes from Nikolay Naumov, a man from Vorobyev’s hometown of Koryazhma, who posted on March 2, 2015, that Vorobyev had gone to Ukraine accompanying “humanitarian cargo,” remained behind to fight, and was ultimately killed and buried in Ukraine. Vorobyev, moreover, was apparently a veteran of the war in Chechnya.<sup>288</sup> This represented more confirmation of a death than is often found, but still, no reporter has gone outside social media to contact people offline for final confirmation.

Given the decree that penalizes such disclosures with jail sentences and the harsh physical attacks that journalists have suffered in covering the Cargo 200 issue, bloggers rather than reporters have had to continue this sort of search—and use methods that journalists might find unethical, such as pretending to be friends of the deceased or even their army buddies to gain the confidence of relatives and obtain their phone numbers.

## Bloggers Find Graves of Three GRU Officers

On May 19, 2015, TV Rain reported that two Russian bloggers, Ruslan Leviev and Vadim Korovin, said they had discovered three graves they believed belong

<sup>283</sup> See [http://vk.com/id34937361?w=wall34937361\\_917](http://vk.com/id34937361?w=wall34937361_917).

<sup>284</sup> “Pskov Informally Commemorates 16 Marines Killed on the Battlefield,” *Kuryyer*, September 2, 2014, <http://www.province.ru/pskov/news/item/1325-pskovichi-neoficialno-pominajut-16-pogibshih-na-pole-boja-desantnikov>.

<sup>285</sup> “Selfie Soldiers: Russia Checks in to Ukraine,” *Vice News*, June 16, 2015, <https://news.vice.com/video/selfie-soldiers-russia-checks-in-to-ukraine>.

<sup>286</sup> “Sergei Vorobyev,” *Russian Soldiers and Mercenaries Killed, Captured, Missing, Seen in Ukraine*, <http://gruz200.net/?n=39456>.

<sup>287</sup> [http://vk.com/wall-98866335\\_53](http://vk.com/wall-98866335_53).

<sup>288</sup> [http://vk.com/wall80851728\\_1933](http://vk.com/wall80851728_1933).

to Russian soldiers in the *Spetsnaz* of the GRU, the Russian military intelligence agency.<sup>289</sup>

Korovin tweeted that they had found the grave of a 21-year-old man with a lone wreath from the Russian Defense Ministry on it and the inscription, “To a Defender of the Fatherland from the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation.”<sup>290</sup>

Leviev tweeted that the grave was that of a GRU officer killed May 5, just shy of his twenty-first birthday. He added that these particular *Spetsnaz* fighters were not related to the two GRU officers, Aleksandr Aleksandrov and Yevgeny Yerofeyev, who had been detained the previous day by Ukrainian forces.<sup>291</sup>

Korovin then explained that the graves were in different locations, 900 kilometers apart but declined to give their exact locations to prevent reprisals against families.<sup>292</sup>

In a blog post explaining their research,<sup>293</sup> Ruslan Leviev identified the locations of two of the three sites. One of the graves was that of Anton Savelyev (call sign “Sava”), though he had used the name “Ivan Ivanov” on his VKontakte profile. By looking closely at a photo that included his judo diploma, the bloggers were able to find his real name and then confirm it among some of his friends, who identified him in pictures.

Leviev determined that Savelyev was from the GRU from three clues: a photo of him standing in front of an obelisk listing the names of men who had died in the Chechen war, which contained the number and name of a unit that was presumably his (no. 54607 of the 16th Separate *Spetsnaz* Brigade of the GRU); photos of army buddies showing a flag with a bat symbol, associated with the GRU; and a fellow serviceman’s video of a military parade that was also labeled with the same number and name of the unit.

That man also spoke of Timur Mamayusupov (call sign “Mamay”), one of Savelyev’s buddies and the second GRU man. They were able to place Mamayu-

supov in Lugansk by tracking a distinctive tank with shark’s teeth painted on the front that showed up in a Russian convoy video in February 2015 and later in a photo of a yard in Lugansk.

The bat was once used as a symbol by the GRU, but there have been numerous reports that it was retired and that a new symbol was created.<sup>294</sup> The exact status of this symbol with regard to the 16th Separate *Spetsnaz* Brigade of the GRU is not clear, but the other two clues are compelling enough to establish that the soldiers were from the GRU.

Once the bloggers had a real name and a city, they sifted through the dead soldiers’ lists of friends to come up with someone who gave his or her phone number and called them, claiming to be friends of the deceased. They learned the location of the grave in a town outside of Tambov and soon were able to take a picture of it.

Eventually they established the identity of the third GRU man as Ivan Kardapolov (call sign “Kardan”), and a reader was able to travel to his grave and get pictures to confirm the site. The reader also learned that scores of FSB agents had descended on Kardapolov’s family and warned them not to talk to the press, and that the family had also kept outsiders away from the funeral.

## Reports on Twitter

The blogger “Tom Breadley”—we cannot verify his identity—has regularly made posts under the irreverent phrase “Fresh Unfresh Russky” showing pictures from VKontakte of Russian soldiers believed to have been killed in the war in Ukraine.<sup>295</sup> He is currently the main regular blogger on this topic, consistently producing posts at a time when most others have stopped. Nothing more is known about his identity or location.

Breadley’s Twitter account, @tombreadley, has filed at least 93 posts this year tagged with this phrase,

<sup>289</sup> “Russian Bloggers Claim to Have Found Graves of GRU Soldiers Killed in Ukraine,” *The Interpreter*, May 19, 2015, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-live-day-456-ukraine-to-allow-osce-and-icrc-access-to-captured-russian-soldiers/#8416>; “Bloggers Found the Alleged Graves of Russian Special Forces,” TV Rain, May 19, 2015, [http://tvrain.ru/news/blogery\\_nashli\\_predpolagaemye\\_mogily\\_rossijskih\\_sp-387563/](http://tvrain.ru/news/blogery_nashli_predpolagaemye_mogily_rossijskih_sp-387563/).

<sup>290</sup> Vadim Korovin, Twitter feed, May 19, 2015, [https://twitter.com/Pjatak/status/600562483900895232?ref\\_src=twsrc^tfw](https://twitter.com/Pjatak/status/600562483900895232?ref_src=twsrc^tfw).

<sup>291</sup> Ruslan Leviev, Twitter feed, May 19, 2015, 9:35 p.m., <https://twitter.com/RuslanLeviev/status/600520135070380032>. See Pavel Kanygin, “I Was on Active Duty”: Interview with Captured GRU Official Aleksandrov,” *Novaya Gazeta*, June 15, 2015, published in translation by Catherine A. Fitzpatrick, *The Interpreter*, June 26, 2015.

<sup>292</sup> Vadim Korovin, Twitter feed, May 19, 2015, 7:23 a.m., <https://twitter.com/Pjatak/status/600562483900895232>.

<sup>293</sup> “(Update) The Investigation of the Deaths of Soldiers from GRU’s 16th Special Forces Unit No. 54607,” Ruslan Leviev’s LiveJournal, May 21, 2015, <http://ruslanleviev.livejournal.com/36035.html>.

<sup>294</sup> “GRU Soldier Spotted in Ukraine?,” *The Interpreter*, August 22, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-186-russian-aid-convoy-enters-ukraine/#3918>.

<sup>295</sup> See @tombreadley on Twitter with the search terms in Russian, *Svezhaya nesvezhaya rusnya*.

which includes a few duplicate cases and some people who are either ethnic Russians or Russian speakers but Ukrainian citizens and natives, such as Aleksey Mozgovoy, the commander of the Prizrak (“Ghost”) Battalion. Mozgovoy, a native of Svatove, was assassinated on May 23, 2015. For Bradley, as for others opposed to Moscow’s adventurism who use sarcasm and parody in their coverage of the war, the Russian-backed separatists are all essentially “Russians.”

Some of Bradley’s Twitter posts include pictures and names only, with no link to VKontakte or other social media sites. This is common among conflict reporters, who justify not showing their sources on the grounds that publicizing the links usually leads either relatives or the Russian authorities to remove the accounts.

One way or another, some of the accounts Bradley mentions have been removed after the soldiers’ deaths, so his information cannot be checked. Even when the profiles remain intact, it is not always possible to verify that the soldier in question was reported as killed. Nevertheless, this set of material is important for further research on Cargo 200. In some cases, it may be possible to match information to local media reports or contact the relatives of the soldiers for substantiation.

The most recent case posted by Bradley, on August 20, 2015, was that of Eduard Gilazov of Ryazan, who used that city’s name as his martial call sign. Gilazov was leader of the Ryazan Diversionary and Reconnaissance Group (DRG), which fought with the separatists.<sup>296</sup> His last posts on VKontakte, still accessible to date, were on July 24, when he wished two comrades a happy birthday and then complained that troops were required to withdraw three kilometers under the terms of the Minsk cease-fire. Gilazov believed that Russian soldiers had been betrayed by the Kremlin leadership, which was not allowing them to fight properly, leading to casualties and fatalities. “When they dumped us all to f\*\*\*, it became clear that combat divisions were not needed, here,” he wrote.

News of Gilazov’s death was also published by a pro-separatist site, so it is likely confirmed.<sup>297</sup>

## News from Russian Ultranationalist Groups

Another source for news about Russian soldiers killed in Ukraine is the websites or social media pages of ultranationalist groups in Russia. They often provide the recruits for combat in Ukraine, and support Russian volunteers with financial and material assistance.

For example, Sergei Kurginyan, a Moscow theater director and leader of the ultranationalist group *Sut’ Vremeni* (Essence of Time), reported that after the final battle at the Donetsk Airport in January 2015, three of his supporters—Russian paratroopers—were killed.<sup>298</sup> Among them was Yevgeny Krasnoshein, a paratrooper whose call sign was “Pyatnitsa” (“Friday”), whose VKontakte account showed him serving in the Russian paratroopers’ division in 2008-2009, and who evidently was a volunteer.

Two others were Yevgeny Sergeevich Belyakov, whose nickname was “Belka” (“Squirrel”) and Igor Vladimirovich Yudin, whose nickname was “Bolgarian” or “Bulgarian.”

## List Maintained by Open Russia of Russian Soldiers Confirmed Killed in Ukraine

In December 2014, Open Russia, the movement founded by businessman and former political prisoner Mikhail Khodorkovsky, published a list of 227 Russian soldiers confirmed as killed in battle in Ukraine by media or relatives’ accounts.<sup>299</sup> This list, which was sourced from the Ukrainian Defense Ministry, was subsequently updated on March 5 to include 267 names.<sup>300</sup>

Many of the names on the list are already familiar to journalists from independent Russian media, including the cases of soldiers reported killed by *The Interpreter*, such as Yevgeny Pushkarev, Anton Tumanov of Mari El Republic, and the nine soldiers from the 18th Motorized Rifle Brigade (army unit 27777).<sup>301</sup>

<sup>296</sup> See <http://vk.com/id123959274>.

<sup>297</sup> “Killed DRG Commander ‘Ryazan’ Eduard Gilazov,” *Achtungpartisanen.ru*, August 19, 2015, <http://achtungpartisanen.ru/ubit-komandir-drg-ryazan-eduard-gilazov/>.

<sup>298</sup> “But How Many Russian Fighters Have Actually Been Killed in Ukraine?,” *The Interpreter*, January 22, 2015, <http://www.interpretermag.com/russia-update-january-22-2015/#6434>.

<sup>299</sup> *The Interpreter* is a project of the Institute for Modern Russia, funded by Pavel Khodorkovsky, the son of Mikhail Khodorkovsky.

<sup>300</sup> “Open Russia Releases List of Russian Combatants Killed in Ukraine, Cited by Ukrainian Defense Ministry Source,” *The Interpreter*, December 24, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/russia-update-open-russia-releases-list-of-russian-combatants-killed-in-ukraine>.

<sup>301</sup> “The Bear Is Not Going to Ask Permission of Anyone” (October 26, 2014), *The Interpreter*, <http://www.interpretermag.com/russia-this-week-putins-neo-imperialism-and-the-price-of-oil/#4701>.

The Ukrainian list also includes names confirmed elsewhere, such as Sergei Markov, a native of Karelia, whose death was reported by a local news site called Vedkar.ru.

In an article accompanying the list, Ilya Barabanov, a special correspondent for the business newspaper *Kommersant*, which is increasingly tilting toward the Kremlin, said that many of the names on the Ukrainian Defense Ministry's list were familiar to him. He noted that many of the dates of death were "May 26," the day of the first serious battle at the Donetsk Airport, in which at least 31 soldiers were killed, and spread over the second half of July until early September, when the "Izvarino Kettle" and then the "Ilovaik Kettle" occurred.

## The Most Active Facebook Group: "Gruz-200"

The Facebook group *Gruz-200 iz Ukrainy v Rossiyu* ("Cargo 200 from Ukraine to Russia," known as "Gruz-200" for short) was started on August 21, 2014, at a time when other such efforts were being launched by bloggers and journalists.<sup>302</sup> This was just after Ukrainian forces captured a BMD-2 revealing the presence of Russian troops in Ukraine (see above). Gruz-200 already had more than 13,500 participants as of September 2, 2014, and to date has more than 30,000. It also has a separate page, as distinct from a group, on Facebook.

The group was initially intended to field reports from relatives and friends of soldiers killed in battle but soon developed into a wide-ranging discussion platform for criticism of the war in Ukraine.

The founder of the group is Elena Vasileva,<sup>303</sup> an environmental activist from Murmansk who had not previously worked on military issues but became a lightning rod for the Cargo 200 issue, deluged with appeals by desperate relatives and vilified by pro-Krem-

lin bloggers. At first she was widely cited by credible regional independent media eager to cover the topic, but then these outlets stopped citing her because they believed her claims were exaggerated and that she was discrediting the cause of attempting to establish the facts. Ukrainian media continued to publish interviews with her.

In an interview with *Radio Svoboda*,<sup>304</sup> the Russian-language service of the U.S.-funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Vasileva said she had received reports from people of "more than 2,000" Russian members of the military killed in August 2014 alone but acknowledged that it was impossible to produce a definitive total. She was unable to give a figure for the deaths that took place earlier in the year but estimated that at least 1,000 were killed before the Russian invasion in August.

No other NGO or independent media had produced figures remotely resembling these high totals; TV Rain had confirmed 34 cases, and later efforts to document the reports, notably by Open Russia, amounted to fewer than 300 deaths.

By September 2014, Vasileva was claiming there were 3,500 Russian soldiers killed in the Ukrainian war—a quarter of what the Soviet Union claimed were lost in Afghanistan in the 1980s (15,000), as analyst Paul Goble noted.<sup>305</sup> Goble further cited a quote from the independent Russian news site *Novy Region* about Vasileva's work that was taken from her Facebook page and gives an idea of how she compiled her numbers:<sup>306</sup>

We are counting Cargo 200 after the 2,000 killed already published: 300 killed in Pobeda, 47 shot as they came out of Ilovaik; 120 killed from the combined column of 1,200 fighters in Snezhnoye (470 wounded); 70 killed among the Pskov paratroopers (10 survived); 230 who were killed in a convoy on the march under artillery fire; 60 cut down in the Caucasus Battalion—a complete artillery division; 59 bodies

<sup>302</sup> "More Than 2,000 Russian Military Were Killed in August Alone—Founder of 'Cargo 200 from Ukraine to Russia,'" *monitor.net*, September 3, 2014, [http://monitor.net.ua/news/300868/bole\\_2000\\_voennyh\\_rf\\_bylo\\_ubito\\_tolko\\_v\\_avguste\\_osnovatel\\_gruppy\\_gruz200\\_iz\\_ukrainy\\_v\\_rossiyu](http://monitor.net.ua/news/300868/bole_2000_voennyh_rf_bylo_ubito_tolko_v_avguste_osnovatel_gruppy_gruz200_iz_ukrainy_v_rossiyu). The group has both a page (<https://www.facebook.com/Gruz.200.Cargo.200>) and a group on Facebook ([https://www.facebook.com/groups/gruz200/?multi\\_permaLinks=738179689641121&notif\\_t=group\\_highlights](https://www.facebook.com/groups/gruz200/?multi_permaLinks=738179689641121&notif_t=group_highlights)). Vasileva also posts on her personal Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/eva220584?fref=nf>.

<sup>303</sup> The transliteration of her name used is the one she has chosen herself on Facebook.

<sup>304</sup> "More Than 2,000 'Cargo 200' Have Come to Russia from the Donbass—Vasileva," *Radio Svoboda*, September 9, 2014, <http://www.radiosvoboda.org/content/article/26563247.html>.

<sup>305</sup> Paul Goble, "3,500 Russian Soldiers Died in Putin's War in Ukraine, Rights Activists Say," *The Interpreter*, September 14, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/3500-russian-soldiers-died-in-putins-war-in-ukraine-rights-activists-say/>.

<sup>306</sup> "In Ukraine, More Than 3,500 Russian Military Killed," *Novy Region*, September 15, 2014, [http://nr2.com.ua/News/world\\_and\\_russia/V-Ukraine-pogiblo-bole-35-tysyach-rossiyskih-voennyh-79981.html](http://nr2.com.ua/News/world_and_russia/V-Ukraine-pogiblo-bole-35-tysyach-rossiyskih-voennyh-79981.html).



in a grave outside Novoazovsk; about 40 bodies thrown into a mine shaft. All together, 926 killed. And those are only those confirmed from various sources. And how many wounded were not brought out in time and not saved? Yes, I forgot, nearly 600 bodies were thrown into the mine at Krasnokamensk...

As we know, while a taped interview of some paratroopers from the 76th Guards Air Assault Division based in Pskov claimed that nearly the entire company—70 or 80 people—was killed, only three were confirmed as dead and buried (see above). The claims that bodies were thrown down mine shafts might at first seem plausible until we recall that in this region of coal-miners and their families, such events would hardly go by without any mention on social media somewhere.

In February 2015, while the Minsk talks were underway, the Ukrainian Russian-language video blogger Anatoly Shariy released several videos that he implied came from contacts within the SBU that supposedly supplied him with intercepts of Vasileva's cell phone and Skype calls.<sup>307</sup>

The videos portrayed Vasileva in an unflattering light as talking to an unidentified man she called "Gena," whom many viewers concluded was her FSB handler, because she appeared to be reporting to him on her contacts with both soldiers' families and Ukrainians involved in POW exchanges. She talked disparagingly of soldiers' relatives and spoke of cash payments for her work and arranging payments of ransom for POWs. All in all, the evidence looked suspicious, but it was also made up of snippets taken out of context; frantic relatives in fact commonly pay ransoms for POWs, with the extortion perpetrated by the combatants, not the intermediaries.

Also suspicious was Shariy's past history of smearing the St. Petersburg Soldiers' Mothers at the same time the official campaign to discredit them and declare them "foreign agents" was launched (see above).

The alleged SBU intercepts were widely distributed, and this, coupled with Vasileva's tendency to state very inflated numbers and not back them up, made many conclude that an intelligence operation had been launched to muddy the waters on the Cargo 200 issue. While this may be the case, it could just as well be the opposite—an intelligence operation to discredit a

person sincerely trying to get attention for a legitimate issue (one that Shariy himself did not cover), even if her numbers were too high. Vasileva herself did not answer the claims made about her and shrugged them off as a "provocation," of which she had faced many.

On August 19, 2015, Vasileva wrote a post for her Facebook group on its anniversary, thanking the 30,199 administrators and participants.<sup>308</sup> She obliquely referred to Shariy's exposé and other "provocations" and the enormous pressure put on her and other administrators, noting that the Facebook group had been closed four times, requiring the personal intervention of Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg to reopen it.

While these claims could not be verified, it is important to note that of the many projects launched to track Cargo 200, most stalled, either due to intimidation of the press or the need to cover other news. This one was still standing.

## Latest Lists of Russian Soldiers Killed and Missing

Interestingly, on August 25, 2015, Oleg Morozov, an activist in the *Zabyty Polk* ("Forgotten Regiment") organization, which is chaired by Elena Vasileva, uploaded to the *Gruz-200* Facebook group a Microsoft Word document with a list of killed and missing soldiers and journalists. As of August 25, there were 1,447 names: 582 for whom basic information was available, such as first and last name, patronymic, date of death, and place of death; 39 for whom there was incomplete information, such as "no. 571," "call sign 'Pancho,'" "machine-gunner," "killed April 17 at the Donetsk Airport";<sup>309</sup> and 857 for soldiers reported as missing.

The figure of 582 for Cargo 200 was more credible than the 5,000 given by Vasileva in the past year, although it also did not represent the last word on the subject. This list did have obvious problems, such as cases for which only a first name was available and the inclusion of at least one person who was later discovered to be alive (Nikolai Krygin). The other cases cited were many of the same ones reported by the independent media and mined from VKontakte.

The *Zabyty Polk* activists note that some citizens

<sup>307</sup> Anatoly Shariy, "Cargo 200: Part 1," February 4, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iq8yUFRGjJ4>; and Anatoly Shariy, "Cargo 200: Wrapping up the Project," February 6, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-lnzA8kBdR4>.

<sup>308</sup> Facebook post, August 19, 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/gruz200/permalink/736476189811471/>.

<sup>309</sup> Post by Oleg Morozov to *Gruz-200* Facebook group, August 25, 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/gruz200/739465859512504/>.

from Ukraine may have ended up on this list, which they say is currently being re-checked. They have also added two new sections to their list recording the losses at two large battles—39 Russian servicemen from the 16th Separate *Spetsnaz* Brigade of the GRU killed on July 9, 2015, near Novoazovsk; and 13 Russian servicemen from the 16th Separate Tank Brigade in Nizhegorod Region killed outside Debaltsevo on July 8, 2015. There was a total of 14 deaths in Debaltsevo in the list. Two Russian bloggers had confirmed the deaths of three of the GRU soldiers (see above).

There was a great deal of incomplete information on the large number of missing soldiers, such as an entry that provided only the soldier's first name of "Sergei," his call sign "Klesh" ("Bed-bug"), and his hometown of Lipetsk. This list may also include some POWs not accounted for, some soldiers killed who were buried in Ukraine or whose funerals were hushed up in Russia, or simply some people who did not want to be found.

By their own admission, some of the Russians who came to fight for the "Novorossiia" cause had criminal pasts or debts they were fleeing in Russia; the Russian who received the surrendering Ukrainians at Debaltsevo, for example, described the large debt that he had to pay,<sup>310</sup> and the list maintained by the SBU has a number of cases of fighters described as having criminal records.<sup>311</sup>

A website with a similar name registered in Ukraine but not affiliated with Vasileva, Gruz200.net, is also maintaining a list of cases of Russian soldiers reported killed in Ukraine, along with lists of soldiers and volunteers sighted in Ukraine and POWs. The contributors to this website have been more cautious about including cases with incomplete information; their list of those killed<sup>312</sup> has a total of 570 with many of the same names as on other lists. They did, however, include Nikolai Krygin.

Unlike other groups maintaining lists, they have tried to put a photo with each record, either of the soldier himself taken while still alive in the service,

or of their dead bodies or graves. In the case of Ivan Korlkov of Barnaul, for example, they showed a picture of his army buddies carrying his casket. In the case of Sergei Vorobyov, they showed comments from social media with condolences indicating he had died. In some cases, they have video tapes, such as for Aleksei Karpenko of Pskov.

Like others who have made lists, they have also put a VKontakte or other social media account where possible, the name and number of the unit they served in, their home town, and their birth and death dates, and if available, something about how they died or in which battle they died.

## Putin.War

Right before he was assassinated, opposition leader Boris Nemtsov was working on a report he had titled *Putin.War* to include evidence he had found of the Russian military presence in Ukraine and the cost of the war to Russia.<sup>313</sup> Nemtsov was a specialist on Russia's economy, and as with his report exposing the corruption of the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics, he wanted to show the enormous financial cost of the upkeep of the separatists and the provision of armor and tanks by Russia to fuel the conflict.<sup>314</sup>

Not long before he was killed, a group of soldiers from Ivanovo who had fought in Ukraine and then not received compensation had turned to him with their complaints.

The last note Nemtsov made was scribbled on a sticky note and contained information about the paratroopers from Ivanovo; he was concerned that the secret police were monitoring his office, so he had jotted down some points to show a colleague. He wrote that paratroopers from Ivanovo had appealed to him regarding 17 of their fellow servicemen who had been killed and whose families did not receive compensation from the state. "But for now are afraid to talk," he noted.

Nemtsov's murder only caused these soldiers and

<sup>310</sup> "Gen. Lentsov's 'Body Double in the LNR' Found—and He's a Russian Colonel," *The Interpreter*, February 24, 2015, <http://www.interpretermag.com/russia-update-february-24-2015/#7084>.

<sup>311</sup> See "Peace-Keeper", Center for Research of Signs of Crimes Against the National Security of Ukraine, Peace, Humanity, and International Law, [psb4ukr.org](http://psb4ukr.org). The site says its purpose is to gather "information for law enforcement authorities and special services about pro-Russian terrorists, separatists, mercenaries, war criminals, and murderers."

<sup>312</sup> See <http://gruz200.net/ubitye>.

<sup>313</sup> *Putin.War*, translated from Russian by Catherine A. Fitzpatrick, published by 4FreeRussia Foundation, May 2015, <http://www.4freerussia.org/putin.war/>.

<sup>314</sup> Catherine A. Fitzpatrick, "Assessing 'Putin.War'—A Look at the Last Investigation by Boris Nemtsov and His Colleagues," *The Interpreter*, May 28, 2015, <http://www.interpretermag.com/assessing-putin-war-a-look-at-the-last-investigation-by-boris-nemtsov-and-his-colleagues/>.

their relatives to be further intimidated into silence and a refusal to talk to the press; his colleagues decided to use the information without attribution in the report they assembled and issued posthumously, to which they gave Nemtsov's title *Putin War*.

Other than the information about the silenced Ivanovo paratroopers, the report does not contain any information about the Cargo 200 issue that was not known before Nemtsov's death, but, as with his report on Sochi, the point was to martial the evidence compellingly and then use it to advocate for an end to the war. Nemtsov was gunned down right beside the Kremlin on February 27, 2015, two days before he and other opposition leaders such as Aleksei Navalny were to lead a march called "Spring" to protest the war in Ukraine and the economic crisis unleashed in part by Western sanctions against Putin's top officials and others who had enabled the war against Ukraine.

The report contains cases covered by *The Interpreter* and others, including that of the severely burned Buryat tank gunner Dorzhi Batomunkuyev and the Mari-El soldier Anton Tumanov.

Much attention related to Nemtsov's murder has focused on his criticism of the "personal army" of Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov in a Facebook post; his discussion of the assassination of the *Charlie Hebdo* journalists by terrorists; the arrest of suspects related to some of Kadyrov's top aides and relatives; and the possible motive of Kadyrov, who had personally threatened Nemtsov in the past, to arrange his assassination. The "Chechen" angle has been fronted by officials and disseminated through leaks to the official and independent press.

But it is important to note that even without Chechen involvement, the Kremlin leadership had motives to silence Nemtsov. On January 27, 2015, a month before he was killed, Nemtsov used his capacity as a regional legislator to formally issue an inquiry to the Prosecutor General Yury Chaika regarding the deployment of the Pskov 76th Guards Air Assault Division to Ukraine and the deaths of other servicemen in Ukraine. Given that the troops were in some cases sent without knowledge of their assignment; that they took part in an aggressive war that had not been formally declared; and that they were "volunteers" taking part in the war as mercenaries, which violates Russian law, Nemtsov believed that there was a clear-cut criminal

case to be launched.

The date of that inquiry—January 27—is the only indirect indication that Nemtsov's persistent inquiries might have upset the Russian leadership enough to target him, for example, with a bureaucratic imperative of "within 30 days." As opposition leader Aleksei Navalny said after the murder,<sup>315</sup> there may have been a meeting in the Kremlin at which someone said that "something must be done" about Nemtsov to put a stop to his activity, and this could have been interpreted in an extreme form—as an assassination.

Regardless of the true motivations, contractors, and perpetrators of Nemtsov's murder, the reality is that he was closely associated with the issue of Cargo 200 and was the most internationally known Russian figure investigating the subject. His death was another devastating blow to any forensic attempt to uncover the truth about Russian war dead in Ukraine.

## OSCE Reports of Cargo 200

The Special Monitoring Mission of the 57-member Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe was deployed to Ukraine by a consensus agreement to monitor the implementation of the first Minsk agreement, and its mandate was renewed after the second Minsk agreement. The SMM produces daily reports by monitors on the ground in southeastern Ukraine, which have proven invaluable for validating reports of the Russian military presence and the failure of combined Russian-separatist forces to abide by the cease-fire.

While the OSCE SMM has published many reports confirming that armed men in uniform have crossed the border from Russia and that the Russian-backed separatists have not withdrawn their heavy artillery as stipulated in the agreement, it has produced few reports on Russians killed in Ukraine, because its mandate as the product of a multilateral organization that includes Russia is to monitor what it sees, not investigate what has been deliberately hidden.

The BBC reported that on November 11, 2014, OSCE monitors spotted a vehicle labeled "Cargo 200" crossing from Russia into Ukraine at the Donetsk border checkpoint in the Rostov region.<sup>316</sup> The monitors said the vehicle returned to Russia several hours later. The SMM did not inspect the vehicle. Notably,

<sup>315</sup> "Alexey Navalny on the Murder of Boris Nemtsov," translated by Catherine A. Fitzpatrick, *The Interpreter*, March 3, 2015, <http://www.interpretermag.com/alexey-navalny-on-the-murder-of-boris-nemtsov/>.

<sup>316</sup> "Ukraine Crisis: Russian 'Cargo 200' Crossed Border—OSCE," BBC Europe, November 13, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-30039004>.

however, the border crossing on the Ukrainian side—Dovzhansky—is currently controlled by the separatists.

In Kiev, Ukrainian security spokesman Andriy Lysenko said the same day that five vehicles “belonging to the Rostov funeral service” had crossed the border, alleging that the bodies of “Russian military men” had been transported.

On August 6, 2015, Paul Picard, the head of the SMM, reported that monitors had recorded vehicles with the sign “Cargo 200” at the Gukovo and Donetsk border checkpoints.<sup>317</sup> He stated that “in a year, 21 such coffins went through” the checkpoints and that vehicles with such labels have been spotted “on both sides of the border.”

The only two checkpoints the SMM is able to monitor are those at Gukovo and Donetsk (not to be confused with the Ukrainian city by the same name). There are other legal and illegal checkpoints that may have also been used to bring out the bodies of those Russians killed in Ukraine.

## Reports of Mass Burials of Russian Soldiers

On March 30, 2015, bloggers reported that Google’s satellite photos had been updated and now showed evidence of hundreds of fresh mass graves in the main cemetery of Rostov, a city of more than a million in the south of Russia, near the Ukrainian border.<sup>318</sup> The graves had signs with the initials “NM” and “NZh,” which stand for “Unknown Man” and “Unknown Woman.”

As we have seen, Rostov has served as a military staging area for supplying the Russian-backed separatists in the Donbass and for preparing Russian invasions of Ukraine. In the past, it has also been a hub for the military to manage the transport of wounded soldiers and war dead.

While as many as 50 people a day might be buried in this cemetery, the second largest in the European part of Russia, it seems unlikely that in the normal course of events, hundreds of people could be buried

in a matter of days, and, in many cases, without date of death or names.

The satellite pictures were published by Misanthropic Division, a neo-Nazi group that has been associated with the pro-Ukrainian Azov Volunteer Battalion. That provenance discredited the evidence for many.

While the Google updates confirmed that the pictures taken by bloggers were in the Rostov cemetery, more research would be required to establish whether the graves contained Russian combatants from the war in Ukraine.

*Gazeta.ru*, a Russian media site that is relatively critical of the government but not particularly vocal on war issues, sent a reporter, Andrei Koshik, to investigate the story.<sup>319</sup> He learned from a local historian that many soldiers from the Chechen war were buried in this cemetery and that it was reasonable to expect that soldiers from the current war in Ukraine would be buried there as well. But he saw a wide variety of ages on the signs, indicating that they were not all of combat age, as originally claimed.

Koshik also interviewed Oleg Melnikov, a field commander in the DNR, who said that Russian soldiers who were killed were buried where they died if their relatives could not be reached or in an emergency. In Slavyansk in the summer of 2014, for example, when the Russian-backed fighters were surrounded by Ukrainian forces, he said that soldiers were then buried just under the name of their commanders—that is, his people would be buried under the letter “M.”

While an admission that Russians have fought and died in the war—and that officials even know this—mass burials were not a mass phenomenon, Melnikov said. “I really doubt that they will make nameless graves in Rostov,” said DNR commander Melnikov. “If I wanted to hide bodies—and of course, we don’t do that—then why not bury them in Donetsk and Lugansk?”

The video blogger Erich Hartmann posted a video on the graves made up of local radio and other interviews.<sup>320</sup> One source said that there were 150 graves, and that a number of them were labeled “Biomaterials,” that is, human body parts. It was not clear why

<sup>317</sup> “OSCE Officials Says at Least 21 Vehicles Labeled ‘Cargo 200’ with Bodies of Soldiers Killed in Ukraine Have Crossed Border,” *The Interpreter*, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-live-day-535-5-ukrainian-soldiers-killed-6-wounded-with-heavy-fighting-around-schastye-gorlovka-and-donetsk/#9394>.

<sup>318</sup> “Satellite Photos Show Mass Graves in Rostov Reported by Bloggers in November 2014,” *The Interpreter*, March 30, 2015, <http://www.interpretermag.com/russia-update-march-30-2015/#7707>.

<sup>319</sup> “Gazeta.ru Reporter Investigates Cemetery in Rostov; Concludes No Mass Graves of Russian Soldiers Killed in Ukraine,” *The Interpreter*, April 2, 2015, <http://www.interpretermag.com/russia-update-april-2-2015/#7756>.

<sup>320</sup> Erich Hartmann, “Cargo 200 from Ukraine to Russia,” October 22, 2014, 4:17, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0IBHkr05E6U>.



these bodies were not incinerated, and bloggers picked up the term as an indication that Russian officials did not value the lives of soldiers who had fought in Ukraine and instead reduced them to the status of mere medical waste.

On June 5, 2015, the blogger Tom Breadley said on Twitter that Russian soldiers were buried at Coal Mine No. 6 near Donetsk, many with the sign “Soldier No. 9,” which means their name was not known.<sup>321</sup> But other local media coverage said the graves were only of local separatists.<sup>322</sup>

The photos were first published by a Donetsk Facebook user whose name was given as “Irina Mi,” but no link was provided. She reported two rows of fresh graves at Coal Mine No. 6 Kapitalnaya, many with the sign “Soldier No. 9,” and said there were reports of war dead being buried in other cemeteries in her town. The cemeteries were surrounded by police, and curiosity-seekers were kept out, with only relatives allowed in, she said.

## Wounded Russian Soldiers

Even more pervasive than reports of Cargo 200 were claims of wounded Russian soldiers returning from the front in Ukraine. While the relatives of killed soldiers might be intimidated into silence and even intrepid journalists might be deterred by brutal physical attacks or threats, the injured soldiers themselves were harder to silence, given their purported sacrifice for their country. Most appear to have been scared into silence by threats of having their disability pension or compensations halted, but a number spoke out precisely because they were not eligible for these compensations as “volunteers” and resented being duped into deployment in combat by promises of bonuses or compensation, if wounded or killed, that in fact never came.

While there were reports of as many as 100 Russian soldiers being brought to the Kirov Military Medical Academy in St. Petersburg in August, and an account

of one of the nine POWs taken by the Ukrainian armed forces in August being sent for emergency treatment to a burn unit in St. Petersburg, none of these soldiers talked to the mainstream media or discussed their experiences on social media.

Ukrainian bloggers made the point that the Russian fighters supposedly “spending their vacation” in Ukraine were ending up severely wounded or killed, leaving bereaved dependents behind, but after the initial wave of protests in August and September 2014, few former servicemen, NGOs, or independent media covered this topic, not only because reporters were intimidated but because the wounded were scattered in many facilities across Russia. Wounded soldiers were brought to the Kirov Medical Academy as reported, as well as the Military Clinical Hospital in the Southern Military District in Rostov; the Military Garrison Hospital VCh No. 52199 in Volgograd; the District Military Clinical Hospital in Yeysk; and also civilian hospitals in these cities, Newsru.ua reported.<sup>323</sup>

This lack of attention for the wounded changed in February 2015, after the battle of Debaltsevo and the signing of the Minsk II agreement.

Most of the media coverage of the Ukrainian rout at Debaltsevo focused on the great Ukrainian humiliation and losses, as combined Russian–separatist forces put Ukrainian forces in a “kettle” on three sides and ultimately closed off the fourth to seize the highway junctions and railroads of this strategic location.<sup>324</sup>

In his interview with *Novaya Gazeta*’s Elena Kostyuchenko, Dorzhi Batomunkuyev, a 20-year-old Buryat man, described his deployment to Ukraine in extensive detail, providing ample evidence that Russian contract soldiers were indeed deployed to battle in Ukraine by their commanders.<sup>325</sup>

Batomunkuyev was originally deployed as part of the 5th Separate Tank Brigade based in Ulan-Ude, the capital of the Buryat Republic. He was drafted into the Russian army on November 25, 2013, but then signed a three-year military service contract that enabled him to be deployed outside his region on June 2014.

<sup>321</sup> Tom Breadley, Twitter feed, June 5, 2015, 1:46 p.m., <https://twitter.com/tombreadley/status/606925019181162497>.

<sup>322</sup> “Local Resident in Donetsk Photographs Cemetery with Nameless ‘Novorossiya’ Soldiers,” *Obozrevatel*, June 6, 2015, <http://obozrevatel.com/crime/64109-v-donetske-nashli-odno-iz-kladbisch-s-sotnyami-bezymyannyih-soldat-dnr-fotofakt.htm>.

<sup>323</sup> “Russian Military Dumps the Bodies of Their Soldiers in the Tunnels of Mines,” *newsru.ua*, September 5, 2014, <http://rus.newsru.ua/ukraine/05sep2014/shahty.html>.

<sup>324</sup> See, for example, “Ukrainian Soldiers’ Retreat from Eastern Town Raises Doubt for Truce,” *New York Times*, February 18, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/19/world/europe/ukraine-conflict-debaltseve.html>.

<sup>325</sup> “Ukraine Live Day 378: Severely Injured Russian Soldier Describes Deployment to Ukraine,” *The Interpreter*, March 2, 2015, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-live-day-378-severely-injured-russian-soldier-describes-deployment-to-ukraine/#7227> and “We All Knew What We Were Going For and What Could Happen,” *The Interpreter*, September 9, 2015, <http://www.interpretermag.com/we-all-knew-what-we-were-going-for-and-what-could-happen/>.

Kostyuchenko reported that Batomunkuyev, a gunner in a T-72B tank, suffered horrific burn wounds when Ukrainian tank fire lodged ammunition inside his tank as he was defending Logvinovo, a village on the highway between Debaltsevo and Artyomovsk.

In October 2014, with his conscript term due to last another month, despite his service contract, Batomunkuyev was sent, along with other *kontraktniki* (contract soldiers, as opposed to draftees) assembled from two military units, to the Rostov region bordering Ukraine to form a new tank battalion. Therefore, his contract began in October, ahead of schedule.

Batomunkuyev told Kostyuchenko that he did not formally resign from the military prior to his deployment to Ukraine, a claim made by some other Russian servicemen found in Ukraine. (RBC.ru reported in February that some Russian draftees were pressured into signing contracts after being recruited into the army, with the promise of early release later.) His draft term was supposed to end November 27, and he was never formally discharged. He also denied that he was duped into going to training when he was really being sent into combat.

DB: We were told that it was for training but we knew where we were going. We all knew where we were going. I was already prepared morally and psychologically, that I'd have to go to Ukraine.

Back in Ulan-Ude, we had painted over the tanks. Right at the train. We painted over the numbers, if someone had unit markings on their tank, those too. We took off our patches and chevrons when we got here, to the training ground. Everything was taken off...for the purposes of maskirovka [camouflaging]. We left our passports at the army base, our army card at the training ground.

And we had experienced guys in our battalion. Some had already been a year or a bit more on contract, some had been 20 years. They said: don't listen to the command, we're going to bomb the khokhly [pejorative term for Ukrainians]. If they even conduct exercises, even so you will still be sent to bomb khokhly.

Really, a lot of echelons were traveling. Everyone spent the night in our barracks. Before

us, there were guys from the Spetsnaz from Khabarovsk, from various cities, only from the east. One after another, you know? Every day. Ours went fifth, on the 25th or 27th of October.

The offload ramp was in Matveyev Kurgan. While we went from Ulan-Ude to Matveyev Kurgan, we saw so many cities. We travelled for 10 days. The closer we got, the more people welcomed us. They waved their hands, they blessed us. We're mainly all Buryats, see. They were blessing us [i.e., Christians were making the sign of the cross over Buddhists].

(He laughs, and starts bleeding again.)

And here, too, when we were moving around. Grandmothers, grandfathers, local children would bless us...The old ladies would cry.

EK: What training ground [were you located at]?

DB: Kuzminka. There are a lot of such training grounds. Tent cities. Some would move in, others would move out. We would meet the previous echelons there. The Kantemir Brigade from the Moscow suburbs came after us. They have paratroopers there and one tank company that is not so powerful. But our tank battalion has 31 tanks. You can do something serious with that.

The Kuzminka training camp described by Batomunkuyev has been documented by Google satellite images, which show a vast military site in the Rostov region of Russia, about 50 kilometers from the border with Ukraine. While photos taken in October 2013 show empty fields, images captured on October 10, 2014, reveal a line of tents and vehicles stretching for around five kilometers, with extensive track marks and craters indicating military training maneuvers.<sup>326</sup> The Matveyev Kurgan offload ramp referenced by Batomunkuyev lies halfway between the Kuzminka camp and the Russian-Ukrainian border.

Kostyuchenko then established that recurring tales of coercion of soldiers to fight in Ukraine were not the entire story:

EK: Could you refuse?

<sup>326</sup> "Large Military Staging Ground Detected in Russia," *The Interpreter*, January 7, 2015, <http://www.interpretermag.com/russia-updatelarge-russian-military-staging-ground-detected-near-ukrainian-border/#6088>. A blast at this camp was also reported on social media: "Ukraine Live Day 435: Huge Blast at Russian Military Camp Used for Invasion," *The Interpreter*, April 28, 2015, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-live-day-435-huge-blast-at-russian-military-camp-used-for-invasion/>.

DB: Of course you could. No one forced us. There were some who refused back in Ulan-Ude, when they felt they could smell smoke. One officer refused.

Thus Batomunkuyev made it clear not only that he had volunteered for combat and knew what he was in for, but that his welcome by local people gave him a sense of the legitimacy of his mission. He was not a protester, just a severely wounded warrior. His story was not covered by the official state media.

Kostyuchenko's original article in Russian on *Novaya Gazeta's* site has received more than 1.8 million views—a large amount for a beleaguered independent site that has been threatened with closure as after racking up two violations of Russia's strict censorship restrictions. The deluge of exposure included sympathy from many people horrified at the obvious results of Putin's war, but was also accompanied by an enormous amount of mockery and even hatred from some on the Internet.

The extensive public attention and the subsequent unearthing of previous articles about dead soldiers put enormous pressure on both relatives and local media, which accounts for what happened next. After Batomunkuyev was transferred from Donetsk to a burn unit in Ulan-Ude, his mother began to tell reporters that his story had been made up.

On April 3, Sergei Basayev, a journalist from the newspaper *Novaya Buryatiya*, decided to follow up on Batomunkuyev's fate and found he was being treated in neighboring Zabaikalsky Territory, but that his mother, Sesegma, had been complaining about the lack of help from the Russian Defense Ministry.<sup>327</sup>

However, Basayev's article was swiftly removed from the site and even cut out of already-printed newspapers. Timur Dugarzhapov, acting editor-in-chief of *Novaya Buryatiya*, said he did not view the incident as censorship, and Basayev did not complain at the time.

*Radio Svoboda* then interviewed Dugarzhapov, Basayev, and another journalist, Arkady Zarubin, about the case.<sup>328</sup> Dugarzhapov said that when they published the article, they received a deluge of traffic and many aggressive comments from Ukrainians, and "the situation grew out of control." He told *Radio Svoboda* that he didn't want his newspaper, which had a print

circulation of 50,000, as well as an online version, to get caught up in the "information war."

Basayev said that he had wanted to get Batomunkuyev's mother's permission to visit him, but she would not allow it because he was in too serious a condition. She then claimed the article had been fabricated. Supposedly, Basayev said, there were other Buryats who had fought in Ukraine, but he had not looked for them; he was worried that Buryatiya would get a bad name with these scandals.

Zarubin said that he had not heard of anyone fighting in the war from Buryatiya, which he attributed to the fact that it was a Buddhist republic where people would oppose fighting. He expressed the belief that there was no massive mobilization of soldiers from Buryatiya; because the republic is small, word would get out. He conceded that Buryats could be fighting in Ukraine as volunteers but said that he had not heard of any except two who have become famous on YouTube: Buryats with the call signs "Vakha" and "Thirteen" who were part of the seizure of Logvinovo in Donetsk Region.

Russian-backed separatist media extensively promoted Vakha, who also helped plant the Lugansk People's Republic flag after the victory at Debaltsevo; most videos that show a Buryat to emphasize "internationalist" help for the separatist cause are in fact just showing this one individual. Ukrainian media also seized on the videos as obvious evidence of a Russian presence. There are few Buryats native to Ukraine.

Nevertheless, there was indisputable evidence of other Buryats fighting in Ukraine. In May, the Atlantic Council, a Washington-based international affairs think-tank, in conjunction with Bellingcat, the UK-based citizens' open source investigation site, issued a report titled *Hidden in Plain Sight: Putin's War in Ukraine*,<sup>329</sup> which documented the story of Bato Dambayev, a Buryat tank operator from Ulan-Ude from the 37th Separate Motorized Infantry Brigade based in Kyakhta, Buryat Republic, who fought alongside soldiers in the 5th Tank Brigade in Debaltsevo. Dambayev was deployed to the same Kuzminka<sup>330</sup> camp as was Dorzhi Batonkuev. The deployment of the 37th Motorized Brigade was also confirmed by Batonkuev in his interview with *Novaya Gazeta* (see above).

<sup>327</sup> "Newspaper Removes Interview with Burnt Russian Tank Gunner's Mother," *The Interpreter*, April 8, 2015, <http://www.interpretermag.com/russia-update-april-8-2015/#7840>.

<sup>328</sup> "Storm at Novaya Buryatiya," *Svoboda.org*, April 7, 2015, <http://www.svoboda.org/content/article/26943338.html>

<sup>329</sup> *Hiding in Plain Sight: Putin's War in Ukraine*, by Maksymilian Czapurski, John Herbst, Eliot Higgins, Alina Polyakova, and Damon Wilson, Washington, DC, Atlantic, Council, July 13, 2015.

<sup>330</sup> The camp is named after the town of Kuzminka; Kuzminsky is the Russian adjective for the town.

As *The Interpreter* reported in January 2015 (see above), the Kuzminka camp was a large staging area for Russian troops used to invade Ukraine. While at the camp, Dambayev posted a picture of himself with a Siberian husky puppy to VKontakte, as did his fellow servicemen. Later he deleted it, but copies were saved by social media users. Bellingcat's Aric Toler was then able to compare a number of photos on VKontakte, some of which were geotagged to the Kuzminka area, and find the exact same puppies.<sup>331</sup>

Simon Ostrovsky, a war correspondent from *Vice*, decided to follow up on the story of these Russian soldiers.<sup>332</sup> Ostrovsky traced the steps Dambayev purportedly took, based on the Buryat's social media posts, in order to place him on the battlefield in Ukraine. He received denials from Russian officials, but journalists had reported the appearance of non-European soldiers, and local townspeople near Debaltsevo confirmed that Russian soldiers had fought there—they distinguished them from local separatists both by their accents in Russian and their more polite behavior.

Ostrovsky then went on to find the locations of a number of the “selfies” Dambayev had taken in Moscow and Taganrog and even geolocated his position atop a checkpoint in a town near Debaltsevo, where he was wearing white bands on his arm and leg. It was already known from the testimonies of other soldiers that this indicated a practice of the Russian Army to enable their soldiers to distinguish themselves from other combatants.<sup>333</sup> That appeared to clinch the fact that Dambayev was deployed in Ukraine.

Ostrovsky then tracked the soldier back to Ulan-Ude and got his phone number through his neighbors. Dambayev refused to give an interview in person and denied he was ever in Ukraine. He then deleted the incriminating pictures on his VKontakte account.

For his trouble, as noted above, Ostrovsky was then denied a press visa to Russia, although his work validated the painstaking efforts of both local and

international bloggers who had mined the wealth of social media produced by Russia's “selfie soldiers” to prove they were deployed in Ukraine.

The widespread media attention brought to the Buryat Republic caused a lot of controversy, however, as officials felt that the coverage of Buryat soldiers in Ukraine was giving the whole republic a bad name. Buryats are Buddhists by tradition and known for pacifism, and Buryat officials loyal to Moscow also felt they had to endorse the official line that there were no Russian soldiers in Ukraine. On July 14, 2015, a regional news site *Asiarussia.ru* published a video of young Buryat men and women explaining that they were not fighting in any wars because aggression was contrary to their peaceful nature and that they were being exploited by the “information war.”<sup>334</sup>

By that time, it was clear from the censorship of *Novaya Buryatiya* and the curious back-tracking of relatives of reporters that silence was the only way to avoid threatened reprisals. And the great price to be paid for any kind of investigative journalism was also clear in Ulan-Ude: just the day before, on July 13, 2015, Yevgeny Khamagan, the editor of the *Asiarussia.ru* himself was brutally beaten<sup>335</sup> in much the same way as Lev Shlosberg had been in Pskov, and TV Rain's chief producer Ksenya Batanova in Moscow. In Khamagan's case, he was attacked by unknown assailants who fractured his neck, causing him to be hospitalized in serious condition. In August, he emerged from a coma to say that he remembered nothing about the attack, but police claimed that he had fallen off a garage roof while intoxicated. His friends who had found him near his home, as well as the Yabloko Party, protested this claim as they had evidence he was beaten by assailants. Khamagan himself believes he was targeted clandestinely by a police chief he had accused of corruption in an exposé on his news site about illegal alcohol sales through news kiosks.

<sup>331</sup> “How These Adorable Puppies Exposed Russian Involvement in Ukraine,” Aric Toler, Bellingcat, March 11, 2015, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2015/03/11/vreditel-sobaka/>.

<sup>332</sup> “Selfie Soldiers: Russia Checks in to Ukraine,” Simon Ostrovsky, *VICE*, June 16, 2015, <https://news.vice.com/video/selfie-soldiers-russia-checks-in-to-ukraine>.

<sup>333</sup> See, for example, “Russian Soldiers Dies in Ukraine Because ‘There Was No Other Job,’” *Kyiv Post*, September 3, 2014, <http://www.kyivpost.com/content/russia-and-former-soviet-union/russian-soldier-dies-in-ukraine-because-there-was-no-other-job-363238.html>, translation of an article by Elena Racheva, “Drugoi raboty-to nyet,” published in *Novaya Gazeta* on September 1, 2014, <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/society/65075.html>. The mother of the soldier Anton Tumanov found a picture on his VKontakte page with such a band and a comment by a fellow soldier that the bands were changed to a different arm or leg every day to signal to other squads that they were on the same side.

<sup>334</sup> “Appeal by Putin's Battle Buryats to the Frightened Residents of Ukraine,” *Asiarussia.ru*, July 14, 2015, <http://asiarussia.ru/news/8295/>. The video was made by Set' [Network], a production center in the Buryat Republic.

<sup>335</sup> “Buryat Editor Yevgeny Khamagan, Opposition Activist Expecting Surgery for Broken Neck After Assault,” *The Interpreter*, Russia Update, July 14, 2015, <http://www.interpretermag.com/russia-update-july-14-2015/#9126>.



## How Many Russian Soldiers Have Been Killed in Ukraine?

It is difficult to make a good estimate of the number of soldiers killed in the war in Ukraine because there is not sufficient confirmation from relatives, credible independent news media, or NGOs for many of the reports.

The independent media in Russia and Ukraine, as well as the Soldiers' Mothers, Cargo 200 from Russia to Ukraine, and Forgotten Regiment groups and some conflict bloggers have all attempted to create lists in the last year, all of them of varying lengths. From a review of this material, *The Interpreter* concluded that no more than 600 cases of Russian soldiers killed in Ukraine are known, and even for this list, in which full names and places and dates of death are available, confirmation has not been secured from relatives or media in every case. Forgotten Regiment has also prepared a list of 857 fighters reported missing but notes that some of these may be Ukrainian citizens, and many of the entries have very little information, sometimes only a first name or a call sign.

Of course, given that according to former National Security Secretary Andriy Parubiy, an estimated 7,000 to 10,000 Russian troops were deployed in Ukraine in the first part of the year (see above), and that the Ukrainian presidential administration has now released a report estimating the “Russian occupying force” (evidently in Crimea) at 33,000, with an additional 9,100-person “regular army” apparently deployed in the Donbass, it is possible that more than 600 have been killed. The figure is not likely to be 2,000, given that this number would be 20 percent higher than the highest estimate of troops deployed in the Donbass.<sup>336</sup>

Recently, Paul Roderick Gregory of *Forbes* reported an article that had surfaced in an obscure Russian online publication called *Delovaya Zhizn'* (*Business Life*), which evidently cited a comment from a State Duma deputy claiming that 2,000 families had received compensation for their family members killed

in Ukraine.<sup>337</sup> The sensational part of the article was subsequently removed and replaced with a paragraph about housing benefits,<sup>338</sup> but a copy of the original version can still be viewed at the Internet Archive; the article was there for five months before it was noticed.<sup>339</sup> It cites Viktor Zavarzin, a member of the State Duma's Committee on Defense, commenting on the budget submitted for 2015–2017 and then under a sub-head, reports that 2,000 families had received compensation for soldiers killed in Ukraine. The sourcing is weak; no independent media in Russia have reported on this comment, and there are no links to any budget documents containing this item. The figure of 2,000 war deaths seems high, given other estimates of the number of soldiers deployed in total, but the true number of Russians deployed in Ukraine may be higher (it is, after all, a clandestine “hybrid” war).

The problem in trying to substantiate the claim of a figure as high as 2,000 is that even the highest numbers indicated in reports of the number of Russians killed at the two biggest battles of the war so far—at Ilovaik and Debaltsevo—have not been confirmed.

The blogger who had helped to find the three GRU soldiers, himself a critic of the war in Ukraine, pronounced the *Delovaya Zhizn'* article a fake, merely designed by the site owner to drive traffic to his ad-laden site.

The battle of Ilovaik was the worst engagement of the war in Ukraine to date (see above). It began on August 7; continued through August 29, 2014, when Ukrainian soldiers were encircled by combined Russian and separatist forces and forced to retreat; and culminated on September 1, when some Ukrainian soldiers were able to break free. While their commanders believed they were retreating under an agreement announced by President Putin to withdraw after leaving heavy artillery, many of them were in fact gunned down as they departed in what was described by some as a “massacre.”<sup>340</sup>

Soon after the event on September 14, 2014, Ukrainian Defense Minister Valery Heletey announced on Ukrainian Channel 5 TV that “107 Ukrainian

<sup>336</sup> “Ukraine Live Day 557: Ukrainian Government Releases Evidence of Russian Military Involvement in Donbass,” *The Interpreter*, August 28, 2015, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-live-day-557-ukraine-reports-109-attacks-over-past-day/#9758>.

<sup>337</sup> “Russia Inadvertently Posts Its Casualties in Ukraine: 2,000 Deaths, 3,200 Disabled,” *Forbes*, August 25, 2015, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/paulroderickgregory/2015/08/25/kremlin-censors-rush-to-erase-inadvertent-release-of-russian-casualties-in-east-ukraine/>.

<sup>338</sup> See [webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache%3Abs-life.ru%2Frabota%2Fzarplata%2Fvoennosluzashchie2015.html](http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache%3Abs-life.ru%2Frabota%2Fzarplata%2Fvoennosluzashchie2015.html).

<sup>339</sup> See <http://web.archive.org/web/20150822092515/http://bs-life.ru/rabota/zarplata/voennosluzashchie2015.html>.

<sup>340</sup> Oksana Grytsenko, “Survivors Recall Ilovaik Massacre,” *Kyiv Post*, September 3, 2014, <https://web.archive.org/web/20140907205716/http://www.kyivpost.com/content/ukraine/witnesses-tell-about-attacks-on-ukrainian-soldiers-trying-to-leave-ilovaik-at-least-100-killed-363204.html>.

soldiers had been killed and 300 Russian soldiers.”<sup>341</sup> A higher death total of Russians didn’t seem plausible, given that it was the Russians who had “kettled” the Ukrainians and fired on them as they retreated, even though a few Ukrainians broke out of the encirclement. Defense Minister Heletey was forced to resign on October 14, 2014, in part because of his responsibility for the failure of military coordination during the battle.

*Unian.net* then reported on August 5, 2015, that new information on the combat deaths put the total number of Ukrainians killed at 366—not 107, but not other estimates as high as 1,000 either.<sup>342</sup>

The number of “300 Russians” appears to have originated with an estimate made on the battlefield by Ukraine’s Dnipro 1 commander Yuriy Bereza,<sup>343</sup> who said that his battalion together with the Donbass battalion had destroyed “about 300 soldiers” and that no one had picked up the bodies after the battle.

The claim, even if true, was never substantiated with lists of names. Even Russian independent media do not appear to have followed up on this story.

The initial surge of the Russian invasion in August was reported from multiple sources as 1,200 troops (for example, see the statement by the mother of Anton Tumanova, above and in *The Interpreter*<sup>344</sup>); by September, there were as many as 7,000 Russian troops reported in the offensive, according to

the Ukrainian government (see above). Nemtsov’s colleagues said that the number of Russian troops was estimated to have increased from 3,000–5,000 to 7,000–10,000 over the course of a year.<sup>345</sup>

But the only other indication that so many Russians could have been killed in August 2014 is the claim by paratroopers that “almost an entire company was wiped out” (some 80 men) among the Pskov 76th Guards Air Assault Division, and this has not been verified.

Regarding Debaltsevo, Elena Vasileva was among those who claimed that at least 39 were killed near Debaltsevo in some of the fiercest fighting of the war. Yet the group she chairs, Forgotten Regiment, only recorded 14 men who were said to have been killed at Debaltsevo. This number remains to be researched.

While the list compiled by Forgotten Regiment (as of August 25, 2015, see above) of 582 killed in action, 39 incomplete reports, and 857 missing might suggest the figure could be as high as 2,000, the list of missing in particular is extremely sketchy, often including only first names or just call signs. The activists acknowledge that the list could contain Ukrainian citizens who fought with the Russian-backed separatists. It is also possible that these individuals include Russian volunteers who escaped criminal records or debts in Russia and do not want to be located.

<sup>341</sup> “The Battle of Ilovaisk: A Turning Point in Russia’s War on Ukraine,” *The Interpreter*, September 15, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/the-battle-of-ilovaisk-a-turning-point-in-russias-war-on-ukraine/>.

<sup>342</sup> “New Data on Victims Near Ilovaisk: 366 Ukrainian Soldiers Killed,” *Unian.net*, August 5, 2015, <http://www.unian.info/war/1108315-new-data-on-victims-near-ilovaisk-366-ukrainian-soldiers-killed.html>.

<sup>343</sup> “300 Dead Bodies of Russian Soldiers To This Day Still Lay Unburied Near Ilovaisk,” *Censor.net*, September 30, 2015, [http://en.censor.net.ua/news/304862/300\\_dead\\_bodies\\_of\\_russian\\_soldiers\\_still\\_rot\\_near\\_ilovaisk](http://en.censor.net.ua/news/304862/300_dead_bodies_of_russian_soldiers_still_rot_near_ilovaisk). Also [http://www.ukrinform.ua/rus/news/tela\\_pochti\\_300\\_ubitih\\_rossiyan\\_do\\_sih\\_por\\_legat\\_nepogrebennie\\_pod\\_ilovayskom\\_1670119](http://www.ukrinform.ua/rus/news/tela_pochti_300_ubitih_rossiyan_do_sih_por_legat_nepogrebennie_pod_ilovayskom_1670119).

<sup>344</sup> “DNR Leader Says They Have Received 1,200 Troops, 30 Tanks and 120 Armoured Vehicles from Russia,” *The Interpreter*, August 16, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-180-the-battle-for-lugansk-begins/#3833>. See also “Are There Chechens Fighting in Southeast Ukraine?,” *The Interpreter*, August 17, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/russia-this-week-minister-says-id-will-be-required-to-access-internet/#3837>.

<sup>345</sup> “Assessing ‘Putin.War’—A Look at the Last Investigation by Boris Nemtsov and His Colleagues,” *The Interpreter*, May 28, 2015, <http://www.interpretermag.com/assessing-putin-war-a-look-at-the-last-investigation-by-boris-nemtsov-and-his-colleagues/>.

## Conclusion

Russia has propagated the myth that an armed insurgency erupted spontaneously in the Donbass and that any Russian participation in the effort to cleave territory away from Ukraine is “voluntary” in nature. This strains credulity to the breaking point, as there is ample evidence that weaponry that does not exist in Ukraine’s arsenal has turned up on the battlefield in the insurgents’ possession at key points in the war.

Moreover, there is evidence that Russia has been quietly burying its war dead—and harassing or defaming anyone in the country who attempts to investigate these obsequies. If the fallen were “volunteers,” there would be no need to designate their deaths “state secrets,” even as Putin bestows honors upon them without ever acknowledging the circumstances under which they were killed.

All available evidence suggests that these Russian fighters are in fact active-duty soldiers sent to Ukraine by the Russian government under the cover of plausible deniability. There is also compelling evidence that the relatives of missing soldiers believe their sons or husbands to have been killed in eastern Ukraine and have been coerced into silence by the Russian government.

Moscow’s military strategy over the past year has been illuminated by its phased infiltration of the Donbass. When Kiev’s Anti-Terrorist Operation was close to routing the separatists in the summer of 2014, Russia launched an outright invasion, injecting new weaponry and military equipment into eastern

Ukraine, backed by mixed formations of *Spetsnaz* and paratroopers, to perpetuate a war that continues to the present day.

The separatists have benefited from the intrinsic advantages of a guerrilla insurgency, underwritten by the conventional hard power of their state sponsor. They have embedded within the civilian populations of the Donbass and hidden their materiel in urban settings, violating international humanitarian law but deterring a massive Ukrainian counterattack—all while receiving a steady stream of resupplies of tanks and sophisticated drone and ground-scan radar equipment, and testing the boundaries of a barely enforced armistice with the hopes of expanding their zone of control. Even where they have been deflected by Ukraine’s military, such as in Marinka in July 2015, the separatists and the Russian government have continued to blame Kiev for violating the Minsk II cease-fire first, thus justifying further attacks by the separatists.

Meanwhile, the threat of a full-scale Russian invasion looms in Kiev, as Russia has amassed tens of thousand of troops at Ukraine’s eastern border under the guise of conducting military “exercises.” Even while Ukrainian casualties continue to mount, this threat has forced the government of Petro Poroshenko and its Western allies into a political compromise with a foreign power that disclaims any official involvement in a war of its own making but nonetheless demands that war’s conclusion on terms of its own choosing.

# Appendix

## OSCE UAV Sightings On Kalmius

### APRIL 26:

<http://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/153501>

The SMM UAV observed 11 tanks and four APCs, with infantry mounted, moving through Kulykove (DPR-controlled, 15 km north of Shyrokyne). Additionally, over the prior three days, the UAV had sighted 17 tanks, three self-propelled howitzers, and 60 APCs in a DPR-controlled area 50 kilometers north of Shyrokyne.

### MAY 6:

<http://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/155756>

An SMM UAV—despite being jammed for 10 minutes around a DPR-controlled village—spotted four tanks in DPR-controlled territory and one tank in government-controlled territory, all in or around villages close to the contact line northeast of Mariupol.

### MAY 7:

<http://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/156046>

An SMM UAV spotted three tanks in government-controlled territory and 30 tanks in DPR-controlled territory, all in or around villages close to the line of contact. Thirteen of these tanks were seen in or around DPR-controlled Sontseve (57 km south of Donetsk). In addition, two mobile 122-mm Grad 9P132 rocket launchers were observed five kilometers west of DPR-controlled Novoazovsk (43 km east of Mariupol).

### MAY 13:

<http://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/157661>

In the DPR-controlled areas of Oktyabr (26 km east of Mariupol), Michurine (70 km northeast of Mariupol), and Sontseve (18 km east of Mariupol), the UAV observed seven MBTs.

### MAY 14:

<http://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/158136>

The SMM UAV, operating in a limited area north of Shyrokyne and west of the line of contact (above government-controlled area) in response to weather conditions, observed one tank north of the government-controlled village of Berdyanske (18 km east

of Mariupol), two tanks east of the village of Orzhonikidze (government-controlled, 10 km east of Mariupol), one tank southwest of Hranitne (government-controlled, 50 km northeast of Mariupol), and three tanks near Andriivka (government-controlled, 50 km north of Mariupol). Three previously observed artillery pieces (likely towed 1520mm cannon) near the government-controlled village of Pionerske (13 km east of Mariupol) were no longer there. Numerous APCs were observed across the flight areas, and the UAV also observed two burning houses in Shyrokyne (20 km east of Mariupol).

### MAY 18:

<http://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/158871>

The SMM UAV observed a total of seven tanks (type unknown) in a DPR-controlled area, approximately 50 kilometers northeast of Mariupol. The SMM UAV also observed one IFV, two military-type trucks, and people in military uniforms in the same area.

### JUNE 1:

<http://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/161686>

The SMM UAV observed a concentration in DPR-controlled territory, 61 kilometers northeast and 30 kilometers east of Mariupol, of at least 10 MBTs of unknown type.

### JUNE 7:

<http://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/162796>

An SMM UAV spotted a concentration of 40 military-type trucks in Petrovskiyi district (DPR-controlled, 20 km southwest of Donetsk city center).

Of particular note among the weapons observed by SMM UAVs was a concentration at a railway station between the DPR-controlled Komsomolske (45 km southeast of Donetsk) and Andriivka (45 km southeast of Donetsk) of seven MBTs. In the same area, the UAV spotted 35 military trucks and 25 APCs. Also of note was a concentration around DPR-controlled Oktyabr (85 km south of Donetsk) of three artillery pieces and two MBTs.



**JUNE 8:**

<http://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/163161>

In DPR-controlled Rozdolne (47 km southeast of Donetsk) an SMM UAV spotted a concentration of nine MBTs in a residential area, one self-propelled howitzer (2S1), and 16 APCs.

**JUNE 9:**

<http://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/163441>

In DPR-controlled Komsomolske (44 km southeast of central Donetsk), the SMM UAV spotted a concentration of five MBTs, 18 APCs, and more than 25 trucks, including two fuel trucks, 400 to 500 medium to heavy artillery ammunition boxes, and a supply of multiple-launch rocket systems. In DPR-controlled Bezimenne (28 km east of Mariupol), the UAV spotted a concentration of two MBTs, 11 APCs/infantry fighting vehicles (IFVs), seven multipurpose light-armored towing vehicles (MTLBs), and around 30 military trucks. In DPR-controlled Sontseve (18 km east of Mariupol), the UAV spotted eight MBTs.

**JUNE 10:**

<http://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/163771>

Near DPR-controlled Sontseve (57 km south-southeast of Donetsk), the SMM UAV spotted a large concentration of military hardware, including, *inter alia*, a SHORAD (short-range air defense) tracked vehicle, nine military-type trucks, an anti-aircraft system (SA-8), eight MBTs, and 20 APCs. In DPR-controlled Ilovaisk (31 km southeast of Donetsk), an SMM UAV saw 32 military trucks.

**JUNE 11:**

<http://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/164126>

In a number of locations in DPR-controlled areas northeast of Mariupol, an SMM UAV spotted, *inter alia*, 14 MBTs, 48 APCs, and two engineering vehicles. An SMM ground patrol observed an additional MBT in the same general area.

**JUNE 14:**

<http://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/164491>

SMM UAVs saw seven MBTs (unknown type),

23 APCs, and at least nine trucks and other vehicles in Komsomolske (DPR-controlled, 43 km south of Donetsk); four self-propelled howitzers in Vasylivka (DPR-controlled, 50 km southeast of Donetsk); and one MBT (unknown type), 14 APCs, and six military trucks in Bezimenne (DPR-controlled, 28 km east of Mariupol).

**JUNE 16:**

<http://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/164961>

In DPR-controlled areas, an SMM UAV detected four howitzers and 14 MBTs, including a concentration of 10 MBTs around Michurine (DPR-controlled, 63 km south of Donetsk).

**JUNE 18:**

<http://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/165461>

In DPR-controlled areas, an SMM UAV detected four howitzers, 11 armored personnel carriers, a concentration of 11 MBTs in the area of Michurine (63 km south of Donetsk), and a further 10 MBTs around Komsomolske (43 km south of Donetsk).

**JUNE 19:**

<http://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/165476>

An SMM UAV detected a concentration of 10 MBTs (unknown type) and 27 armored vehicles in Komsomolske (DPR-controlled, 43 km south of Donetsk), as well as four self-propelled artillery pieces (likely 122-mm 2S1 Gvozdika) approximately 1 kilometer west-southwest of Vasylivka (DPR-controlled, 50 km south-southeast of Donetsk).

**JUNE 23:**

<http://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/166601>

In DPR-controlled areas northeast of Mariupol, the SMM UAV observed one MBT, one mortar, and three artillery pieces. In addition, in the area of Komsomolske (43 km south-southeast of Donetsk), the UAV observed seven MBTs and in a quarry nearby 12 APCs being loaded with ammunition, forming a convoy, which proceeded to Vasylivka and farther to Michurine (61 km south of Donetsk). In the same sector, an additional nine MBTs and 10 APCs were also seen.

**JULY 1:**

<http://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/169016>

In DPR-controlled areas, the SMM UAV spotted two MBTs and three artillery pieces in Oktiabr (26 km northeast of Mariupol), four MBTs in Sartana (19 km northeast of Mariupol), four MBTs in Bezimenne (30 km east of Mariupol), and two towed artillery pieces in Zaichenko (25 km northeast of Mariupol).

**JULY 2:**

<http://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/170121>

At a location south of Sontseve (DPR-controlled, 62 km northeast of Mariupol), the SMM UAV spotted ten MBTs during the night between 1 and 2 July. During the day on July 2, an SMM ground patrol dispatched to the same area did not hear or see any tanks, heavy weapons, or armed personnel but notably, the patrol had only limited access to that area. It observed recent tracks from tracked vehicles on a dirt road, which led to an area south of the village that appeared to be a military training area.

**JULY 4:**

<http://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/170456>

On July 4, five MBTs were spotted in DPR-controlled areas east of Shyrokyne. Also in DPR-controlled areas, two MBTs were observed near Michurine (55 km northeast of Mariupol); a concentration of ten MBTs and eight APCs near Sontseve (61 km northeast of Mariupol); four self-propelled howitzers also in the same sector; and a concentration of seven MBTs, 23 APCs, two pontoon bridge layers, and one 240-mm mortar (Tyulpan) near Komsomolske (44 km southeast of Donetsk).

**JULY 7–8:**

<http://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/171516>

The SMM UAV observed concentrations of military hardware in DPR-controlled areas close to the contact line: seven MBTs, 30 APCs, and at least 37 military trucks in and around DPR-controlled Komsomolske (75 km northeast of Mariupol); nine MBTs, eight APCs, and one military truck at a location south of Sontseve (61 km northeast of Mariupol); and four MBTs, 26 APCs, and 34 military trucks in Bezimenne

(29 km east of Mariupol). The SMM UAV also spotted three MBTs near Michurine (61 km northeast of Mariupol) and two MBTs near Sakhanka (24 km east of Mariupol).

On July 7 and 8, the SMM UAV was subjected to multiple incidents of jamming around Sakhanka, Zaichenko, Oktiabr, Svobodne (all DPR-controlled, 24, 25, 26, and 49 km northeast of Mariupol, respectively), and Shyrokyne.

**JULY 10:**

<http://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/171856>

SMM UAVs observed concentrations of military hardware in and around DPR-controlled Komsomolske (76 km northeast of Mariupol), noting six MBTs, 41 APCs, and more than 40 military trucks of different types. In DPR-controlled Sakhanka (22 km east of Mariupol), the UAV spotted fresh craters assessed to have been caused by artillery fire. In DPR-controlled Bezimenne (30 km east of Mariupol), the UAV observed three MBTs, 28 APCs, and 30 military trucks.

**JULY 11–12:**

<http://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/172261>

SMM UAVs observed concentrations of military hardware in and around DPR-controlled Komsomolske (45 km southeast of Donetsk, 98 km northeast of Mariupol), noting on July 11–12 at least 14 MBTs, 40 APCs, and more than 40 military-type trucks. In areas adjacent to Komsomolske, SMM UAVs also observed an additional 16 military-type trucks, two MBTs, and one self-propelled howitzer (most likely a 2S1 Gvozdika). On July 11 the UAV observed 5 km south of Komsomolske, in DPR-controlled Vesele (3 km south of Komsomolske, 47 km southeast of Donetsk), one anti-aircraft short-range surface-to-air missile system (9K35 “Strela-10”).

**JULY 14:**

<http://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/172886>

SMM UAVs continued to observe concentrations of military hardware in and around DPR-controlled Komsomolske (49 km south of Donetsk), noting five MBTs, 43 APCs, and 100 military-type trucks. Fur-

thermore, in DPR-controlled areas the UAVs spotted the following: in Bezimene (13 km east of Mariupol), three MBTs; in Novolaspa (48 km south of Donetsk), one MBT; and in Bila Kamyanka (54 km south of Donetsk), one MBT and one self-propelled howitzer.

#### JULY 16:

<http://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/173426>

The SMM UAV detected a concentration of military hardware, including six MBTs, at least 35 APCs, and more than 40 military-type trucks near DPR-controlled Komsomolske (45 km southeast of Donetsk).

#### JULY 17:

<http://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/173446>

SMM UAVs continued to observe concentrations of military hardware in DPR-controlled areas: in Komsomolske (49 km south of Donetsk), seven MBTs, 24 APCs, four infantry fighting vehicles (BTRs), and at least 35 military-type trucks. In Bila Kamyanka (52 km south of Donetsk), UAVs spotted two MBTs.

#### JULY 20:

<http://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/173901>

The SMM UAVs observed the following in government-controlled areas: 17 MBTs and several military trucks near Zaporizke (33 km northeast of Mariupol), and an anti-aircraft missile system (SA-8 “OSA”) with a towed radar near Shevchenko (46 km north of Mariupol). While monitoring DPR-controlled areas, the SMM UAV was jammed.

#### JULY 21:

<http://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/174071>

The SMM UAV observed a concentration of 11 MBTs, 31 APCs, four towed artillery pieces (probably 122-mm D-30 howitzers), and at least 31 trucks in DPR-controlled Bezimenne (30 km east of Mariupol).

#### JULY 22:

<http://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/174226>

In DPR-controlled areas the SMM UAV detected the following: one MBT in Bila Kamyanka (57 km northeast of Mariupol), one MBT in Novolaspa (58 km northeast of Mariupol), two artillery pieces

in Zaichenko (26 km northeast of Mariupol), and three artillery pieces in Oktiabr (30 km northeast of Mariupol). During their operations, the SMM UAVs were exposed to severe and intentional jamming of a military origin that caused one aircraft to crash.

#### AUGUST 12:

<http://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/177221>

On its first day of flying—since a jamming incident on 22 July that caused the destruction of another SMM unmanned aerial vehicle and its camera—an SMM UAV experienced what the SMM assesses as severe military-grade video signal and global positioning system (GPS) jamming in numerous areas east, northeast, north, and west of government-controlled Mariupol (100 km south of Donetsk). Both the camera feed and control over the vehicle were affected.

The SMM UAV did, however, observe shell impacts in an area east of government-controlled Starohnativka (51 km south of Donetsk, 53 km northeast of Mariupol). To the east of DPR-controlled Bila Kamyanka (52 km south of Donetsk, 54 km northeast of Mariupol), the UAV spotted three APCs. One APC was observed by the UAV in DPR-controlled Novolaspa (49 km south of Donetsk, 58 km northeast of Mariupol), and a further two APCs in DPR-controlled Starolaspa (52 km southeast of Donetsk, 61 km northeast of Mariupol). East of government-controlled Starohnativka (53 km south of Donetsk, 53 km northeast of Mariupol), the SMM UAV noted signs of shelling.

#### AUGUST 13:

<http://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/177581>

Although the SMM did not reach Starohnativka, its UAVs spotted military hardware in various locations in the general area: in and around DPR-controlled Bila Kamyanka (52 km southeast of Donetsk, 54 km northeast of Mariupol), seven APCs; in and around DPR-controlled Novolaspa (49 km south of Donetsk, 58 km north-northeast of Mariupol), three APCs and a military-type truck; east of government-controlled Starohnativka (51 km south of Donetsk, 53 km north-northeast of Mariupol), five APCs, an MBT, and a military-type truck; in and around DPR-controlled

Komsomolske (40 km southeast of Donetsk; 76 km northeast of Mariupol), four APCs and seven military-type trucks; and in DPR-controlled Michurine (55 km southeast of Donetsk, 54 km northeast of Mariupol), four MBTs and a military-type truck.

#### **AUGUST 15:**

<http://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/177826>

The SMM UAVs observed in DPR-controlled areas one R-330ZH Zhitel jamming communication station and one MBT in Michurine (54 km east of Mariupol), one MBT in Starolaspa (60 km northeast of Mariupol), and one MBT in the east of Novotroitske (36 km southwest of Donetsk).

#### **AUGUST 19:**

<http://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/178131>

SMM UAVs spotted in DPR-controlled areas four MBTs in Michurine (54 km east of Mariupol) and two towed heavy artillery pieces in Zaichenko (26 km northeast of Mariupol).

#### **AUGUST 20:**

<http://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/178396>

In violation of respective withdrawal lines, the SMM UAV observed in DPR-controlled areas the following military equipment: seven MBTs and two APCs west of Starolaspa (59 km northeast of Mariupol), four heavy artillery pieces and four APCs northeast of Bila Kamyanka (58 km northeast of Mariupol), and six MBTs and 24 APCs in Komsomolske (75 km northeast of Mariupol).

#### **AUGUST 21:**

<http://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/178411>

The SMM—through the use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs)—spotted in DPR-controlled areas three main battle tanks (MBTs) west of Starolaspa (59 km northeast of Mariupol) and two MBTs and ten APCs in Bezimenne (30 km east of Mariupol). While flying over Shyrokyne (20 km east of Mariupol) and government-controlled Volodarske (21 km northwest of Mariupol), the SMM’s unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) was jammed.

#### **AUGUST 23:**

<http://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/178481>

In “DPR”-controlled areas near Komsomolske (42 km southeast of Donetsk), the SMM observed what appeared to be a concentration point of equipment and armed individuals: five military-type fuel trucks, eight military-type trucks, two “Kamaz” military trucks, three armored combat vehicles (ACV), one armored personnel carrier (APC), one anti-aircraft gun (with ZU-23 mounted), and one “Ural” armored military truck with armed personnel wearing “Spartak” battalion insignia.

## About the Authors

**James Miller** is managing editor of *The Interpreter* and has reported for the website on Russia and Ukraine since 2013. He is a contributor at *Reuters*, *The Daily Beast*, *Foreign Policy*, *Vice News*, *The Moscow Times*, and other publications. He is an expert on verifying citizen journalism and has also covered events in Syria and Iran since 2009.

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**Michael Weiss** is editor-in-chief of *The Interpreter*, founded in May 2013 as a news and translation service focusing on Russia and Ukraine. The website has become a high-traffic resource for journalists, diplomats, and policymakers from around the world, with its articles cited by presidents, parliamentarians, ambassadors, and supranational governing bodies. He is also a senior editor at *The Daily Beast* and co-author of the *New York Times* bestseller *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror*.



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