



Ukrainian servicemen (L) talk to armed men, believed to be Russian servicemen (Green Men), at Ukrainian military base in Perevalnoye, near the Crimean city of Simferopol, 13 March 2014.

Russia's Green Men: The Strategic Storytellers of Hybrid Warfare

by Tyler D. Wentzell

Major Tyler Wentzell, CD, JD, MA is an infantry officer on staff at the Canadian Forces College as the Distance Learning Deputy Programme Officer and instructor. He is the author of *Not for King or Country: Edward Cecil-Smith, the Communist Party of Canada, and the Spanish Civil War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), which examines, among other things, Russian influence operations in Canada and Spain in the inter-war period. This article is an adaptation of his Joint Command and Staff Programme final paper and does not represent the position of the Department of National Defence or the Canadian Forces College.

The “Little Green Men” who seized Ukrainian military and government facilities in February and March 2014 have become the mascots of Russia’s “new” way of war.¹ Russia’s Green Men infiltrated Crimea, linked up with local irregular forces, and seized their objectives. The obfuscation of their origins was relatively limited – the Green Men wore no national

markings and Russian officials simply claimed that they were Crimean in origin – but the approach achieved the desired effect. Crimea acceded to the Russian Federation amidst much political outrage but little meaningful action. Russian Green Men appeared in South-Eastern Ukraine shortly thereafter, and, presumably, they will play an important role in a Russian intervention in the Baltic region. Consequently, the Green Men are a phenomenon worth understanding. This article argues that the Green Men are best understood through the lens of Russian hybrid warfare in that they produced physical effects, but that these were secondary to their effects in the information domain. By understanding the use and context of the Green Men in Crimea and South-Eastern Ukraine, the method can be more effectively countered in future conflicts.

Little is known – from publicly available sources that is – about Russian internal decision making. We are left to draw conclusions based on observed actions, reasonably foreseeable outcomes, presumed objectives and what published records exist.²



Crimea, peninsula in Eastern Europe, political map.

Within these constraints, this article argues that Russia's Green Men were employed as they were in order to create a strategic narrative meant to distract the international community from aiding Ukraine. This article first sets out the background of the Russia intervention in Crimea and the concept of hybrid warfare. Second, it examines what value there was to these Russian Green Men deploying without identifying markings, concluding that it made little difference in terms of the tactical or legal situation. The main effects were in the information domain. Third, this article examines what utility there might be to Russia's future employment of Green Men in the Baltic States.

Background

Crimea was part of either the Russian Empire or the Soviet Union from 1783 until 1991. In 1954, shortly after the death of Joseph Stalin, the Soviet Union transferred control of Crimea from one of its constituent republics to another. Crimea left the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, and joined the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Crimea became the Autonomous Republic of Crimea within the Republic of Ukraine. However, Russian interest in and influence upon the peninsula persisted. According to the 2001 Ukrainian census more than 60% of Crimeans identified as Russian-speakers. There was considerable trade between Crimea and Russia across the Kerch Strait, and Russia maintained its military facility at Sevastopol, home of its Black Sea Fleet. The Black Sea Fleet, although separated from the Mediterranean Sea by the Bosphorus, is critical to

Russia's ability to project power against the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) southern flank.

The Green Men appeared in Crimea at the height of a political debacle in Kiev. Tensions had been high for some time. The polity was divided in many ways, relevant here was the split between those that saw their country's future with Russia and those who saw it with the European Union (EU) and NATO. Amidst the tumult, Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich fled Ukraine on 21 February 2014 and sought refuge in Russia, by which time Russia had already begun moving additional forces into Crimea across the Kerch Strait and directly through the port of Sevastopol. Then, on the morning of 27 February, fewer than 60 masked soldiers appeared in the Crimean capital of Simferopol and seized government buildings. They raised a Russian flag over the Crimean Parliament and forced the law-makers to accept the prime ministership of the leader of the pro-Russian party. That night, more Green Men seized airports and military facilities. The Green Men appeared without warning, and seized their objectives before handing off what they had seized to local irregular forces principally composed of pro-Russian separatists.³ The Ukrainian Ground Forces and police offered little resistance to the Green Men or the militias in the chaos, and then the hamstrung political leadership in Kiev ordered them not to resist.⁴

Russian President Vladimir Putin initially denied that these soldiers were Russian, claiming instead that they were members of local Ukrainian self-defence forces.⁵ The press dubbed these soldiers "Little Green Men" or sometimes, due to their discipline

and professionalism, “Polite People.”⁶ The soldiers wore green uniforms and carried Russian personal equipment and weapons, but did not bear Russian flags or other identifying insignia.

Despite the absence of this insignia or an expression of responsibility by Russia, early media reports show that there was little doubt that these invaders were Russian. Indeed, why would the Green Men need a different term at all to distinguish them from the militias if they were believed to be one and the same? There was ambiguity in the situation, certainly, but by mid-March, an Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) inspection team reported substantial evidence that the Green Men were Russian soldiers based on their use of Russian personal equipment, small arms, crew-served weapons, and BTR-80 armoured personnel carriers.⁷

On 2 March, claiming to be acting in support of the Crimean Parliament and to secure Russian interests at their naval base at the port of Sebastopol, Russian military units overtly entered the peninsula, marking the transition from plausibly deniable actions to open military intervention.⁸ Russian information operations, already successful in narrative building, now included significant counter-command activities: cyberattacks shut down Ukrainian communications infrastructure and government websites, and the cellular phones of Ukrainian officials were jammed.⁹ At that point, Russia had special operations forces (SOF) operating throughout the Crimean Peninsula with significant influence over pro-Russian militia groups, an armoured force ashore, naval supremacy in the Black Sea, and the means to project considerable air power from bases in the Northern Caucasus region. Russia had called the international community’s bluff, and military intervention to save Crimea seemed impossible. On 18 March, Russia and the ostensible representatives of Crimea signed a treaty incorporating Crimea into the Russian Federation. Although this accession is not recognized by the international community at large, the fact remains that Russia presently holds *de facto* control over the peninsula.¹⁰

Hybrid Warfare

Although most characteristics of hybrid warfare are hardly new, a reasonable starting point for discussing the idea is the 2013 article written by then Russian Chief of the General

Staff, General Valery Gerasimov. Writing in the wake of the 2011 Arab Spring, Gerasimov noted that conflicts with a clear delineation between states of war and peace were a thing of the past. Most conflicts occurred somewhere in between, and the outcome of these conflicts were more likely to be shaped by non-military means than by firepower. Disinformation and subterfuge precede combat operations. SOF working with “internal opposition” in concert with information operations create a “permanently operating front through the entire territory of the enemy state.” Gerasimov noted: “The open use of forces – often under the guise of peacekeeping and crisis regulation – is resorted to only at a certain stage, primarily for the achievement of final success in the conflict.”¹¹



Russian Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov, 23 May 2013.

REUTERS/Alamy Stock Photo

Gerasimov’s article was not doctrine, nor was it a description of how he intended to conduct offensive operations – it was actually a description of how he thought NATO might attack Russia.¹² Consequently, it would be an error to ascribe too much to Gerasimov’s words. He was not setting out his plan for invading Crimea, South-Eastern Ukraine, and the Baltic states, but rather reflecting upon the realities of modern warfare. Nonetheless, in Gerasimov’s article, we can see the basis of Russia’s Green Men.

Gerasimov states that non-military activities – such as information operations – are often more potent than firepower, and although he makes no express mention of obscuring the national origins of the SOF elements working with internal opposition, he juxtaposes them against the subsequent “open use of force.” This suggests that the SOF he imagines operating throughout the enemy state should ideally be plausibly deniable by their country of origin.

This “new” form of warfare is referred to in Russia as non-linear warfare or new generation warfare. In the West, it is often misleadingly called the “Gerasimov doctrine” or, more commonly, hybrid warfare.¹³ The term hybrid warfare existed before Gerasimov’s article or the Russian occupation of Crimea. The term is generally credited to United States Marine Corps Officer Frank G. Hoffman, writing in 2007, who described it as incorporating, “a full range of different modes of warfare, including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder.”¹⁴ Notably, while regular and irregular forces have long complimented each other, Hoffman described hybrid warfare as

blending the two forces in the same space, at the same time, and within the same organization.¹⁵

Since Hoffman's writing, and especially in the years since 2014, many English and French-language scholars have offered their own definitions of hybrid warfare. Several of these definitions have been reverse-engineered from Russian actions in Crimea and South-Eastern Ukraine, and often encapsulate almost everything besides large-scale conventional combat operations. Consequently, although the term remains broadly used in military documents, the term has also been heavily criticized for its lack of precision, the fact that the term describes how the West views Russia and not how the Russian military or national security apparatus views itself, and for being "astrategic", in that it does not help us understand either Russian activities or intentions. Rather, hybrid warfare, if it is anything, is a pragmatic operational approach that will largely be shaped by local conditions.¹⁶

The analysis that follows is predicated on the idea that the specific definition of hybrid warfare is not as important as the broader concept. Adversaries will seek to further their objectives using whatever military and non-military tools are at their disposal, while remaining below the threshold that might trigger conventional operations where NATO and its allies excel. This is a pragmatic approach to war that makes significant use of misinformation, disinformation, and difficult or impossible to attribute military and non-military activities in the grey zone between war and peace such as cyberattacks, proxy warfare, and irregular warfare. The Green Men, as used in Crimea, are certainly an example of this.

What the Green Men Did and Did Not Achieve

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

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

they be captured. Regardless, the use of Green Men is a presumptively legal ruse of war.¹⁷

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

In the majority of cases, the Green Men were obviously combatants committing hostile acts. The Ukrainian soldiers could have fired upon the Green Men whether they believed they were Russian state forces, irregulars, or otherwise. There was no obligation for the Ukrainian Ground Forces to determine the precise identity of the combatants.

If the use of Green Men – that is, the simple act of removing patches and pretending that the soldiers were Crimean in origin – did

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

It is important to note that the Russian claims regarding the Green Men both addressed what the Green Men *were* (positive statements), and also what they *were not* (negative statements). According to Russian authorities, the Green Men *were not* Russian soldiers. This was an entirely predictable claim. The Russian Federation sought to maintain plausible deniability of the military operation and disavowed their actions within a sovereign state.¹⁸ But they also made the positive claim that the Green Men *were* Ukrainian self-defence forces.¹⁹ This claim – implausibly, given all the other known factors – shifted the characterization of the conflict from an international conflict to a domestic one. If it was a domestic conflict, then the sovereign state of Ukraine could certainly invite foreign intervenors onto its territory to provide assistance, but there was less of an impetus to rally the international

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Armed men, believed to be Russian servicemen (Green Men), stand guard, with Ukrainian servicemen seen in the foreground, at a military airbase, in the Crimean town of Belbek, near Sebastopol, 22 March 2014.

community. If it was an international conflict – that is, Russian interference in the domestic affairs of Ukraine – then it was, at a minimum, a violation of the United Nations (UN) Charter’s prohibition on the use of force against the territorial integrity of a state, and a call to action for the UN’s membership.²⁰

Russian officials justified their annexation of Crimea using three key messages. First, they argued that the transfer of Crimea within the Soviet Union from Russia to Ukraine in 1954 was illegitimate – the annexation was therefore righting a historical wrong. Second, they dismissed American and EU condemnation of their actions as nothing more than their instinctive, vestigial Cold War resentment. Third, they argued that the ascension of Crimea to Russia was an act of self-determination.²¹ The Green Men were directly relevant to the latter point. The Green Men communicated that the uprising in Crimea was an act of self-determination – the Crimean people were rising up against the Ukrainian state – and the annexation was merely the continuation of this desire.

Future Applications

Although Russia’s use of Green Men was very successful in Crimea, it should not be viewed as a panacea. Specific conditions were required for the Green Men to be effective. Anton Shekhovtsov, a Ukrainian expert on Russia’s manipulation of right-wing proxies, points to three conditions necessary for the Green Men operations. First, the targeted region must largely be Russian in terms of culture and language – this affords the Green Men with ethno-cultural camouflage. Second, the forces must be able to reach their objectives covertly which limits the geographical range of the Green Men from Russian territory. Third, border control must be weak enough in the target country for the Green Men’s reliable insertion.²² To these three, I would add one more: the will to fight. When Russia’s Green Men arrived in Crimea, the Ukrainian state

was politically divided and perhaps unsure if they could win in Crimea given Russia’s substantial forces on or near the Crimean Peninsula. Consequently, the Green Men were able to seize and hold their objectives while establishing the narrative that the conflict was an internal matter. While the international community dithered in the face of this narrative, Russia continued the ruse and Crimea acceded to the Russian Federation.

The circumstances in South-Eastern Ukraine were similar to Crimea, but dissimilar enough to make all the difference. The three conditions described by Shekhovtsov were not met. There is a Russian-speaking minority in

South-Eastern Ukraine, but it is less predominant than in Crimea. Although South-Eastern Ukraine is contiguous with Russia, the border was more secure and Russia did not already have sizeable forces in South-Eastern Ukraine (such as their naval base in Sebastopol). Furthermore, by the time Russia launched operations in South-Eastern Ukraine, the Ukrainian state had mobilized greater cohesion and the will to fight. Perhaps for these reasons, the Russian intervention in South-Eastern Ukraine made less use of Green Men, and greater use of proxy forces and direct intervention by conventional forces – claimed by Russia to be “volunteers” and not acting under state direction.²³

The next conflict in which Russian Green Men may play a role is the Baltic region.²⁴ Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia are contiguous with Russia, and Estonia and Latvia are home to large Russian-speaking minority communities. The residents of the border city of Narva in Estonia are mostly Russian-speaking, and the Latvian capital of Riga has a population of approximately 50% Russian-speakers – they seem likely candidates for the sudden appearance of Green Men.²⁵ While this threat should not be ignored, there are a few reasons why Green Men in the Baltic States are less likely to be successful in the seizing of territory.

First, the border between Russia and the Baltic states is hardly porous. It is a well-guarded border in terms of waterways, airspace, and land crossings. This reduces – but does not eliminate – the likelihood of infiltration by Russian SOF. Russian commanders might still accept the risk inherent to Green Men slipping across the border as formed military organizations, or they may adopt novel means of infiltration such as using commercial travel or smuggling.

Second, the Baltic States continue to communicate their will to fight any would-be invaders. For example, the Estonian head general in 2015, Riho Terras, stated that, “the first little green

man to set foot on Estonian soil will be shot.”²⁶ Russian Green Men would have difficulty building a strategic narrative if they are captured or killed early in their operations.

Third, the Baltic states (unlike Ukraine) are members of NATO and afforded protection under the collective defence provisions of NATO’s Charter, and NATO’s Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) reduce the effect of Green Men-related ambiguity delaying initial mobilization.²⁷ The initial mobilization, including Canada’s eFP Battle Group in Latvia, has already occurred. That said, Russia’s Green Men do present specific challenges to the concept of collective defence.

The use of Green Men presents the eFP units with a conundrum: To what extent should the Green Men and any local supporters be treated as a foreign incursion (which falls within their mandate) or as domestic unrest (which does not)? Consider a scenario where an eFP unit engages in a limited combat operation in Estonia against Russian Green Men operating with a local criminal element. This event is simultaneously an act of foreign interference and domestic criminality. While the use of force may be entirely justified, the secondary and tertiary effects might be disastrous for the alliance. Russian information operations would almost certainly seize upon the event as an infringement upon Estonian sovereignty, a manifestation of NATO’s alleged heavy-handedness, and invoke its historical claim as the protector of Russian-speaking peoples everywhere. For the eFP contributing nation, public support for the continued deployment may be irrevocably eroded. In this scenario, the physical effects of the Green Men’s incursions would be minor compared to the effects in the information domain.

An additional consideration is that the collective defence provision of the NATO Charter requires clear evidence of an armed attack. Article V of the NATO Charter states that an armed attack upon one of the member states in Europe or North America shall be considered an armed attack against all members. Should that occur, member states “will assist the Party or Parties so attacked

by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area.”²⁸ Russian use of Green Men might sufficiently obscure the Russian origin of the attack to give more reluctant members of NATO grounds to debate whether or not an armed attack has indeed occurred (as opposed to a domestic uprising), or to minimize their contribution.²⁹ Thus, a limited use of Green Men in the Baltic States might have disproportionate effects in the information domain. A crisis of confidence within NATO would be an ideal precursor to Russian aggression in the Baltic States or elsewhere.

Conclusion

Russia’s Green Men were effective in Crimea. Russian SOF soldiers skillfully infiltrated Ukrainian territory, moved to their objectives, coordinated activities with irregulars, and most importantly established a strategic narrative. The fact that these soldiers were unmarked achieved little from a tactical or legal perspective. The principal effect of the absence of national markings and the broader information operations campaign was to bolster the strategic narrative that the events in Crimea were initially domestic in origin. This distracted the international community and facilitated Russia’s subsequent actions: Overt military operations to support the purported self-determination movement and secure its interests, and incorporate Crimea into the Russian Federation. Russia’s Green Men were strategic storytellers, providing an important element to the story that Russia sought to tell the international community.

Russia may use its Green Men on future operations. For reasons outlined in this article, the Baltic States present the Green Men with a more challenging environment and much greater risks than were faced in Crimea. However, the threat should not be dismissed out of hand. The Green Men are strategic storytellers, and if they can overcome the physical challenges of operating in the Baltic States, they may well be used to achieve effects in the

informational domain. While their ability to support the seizing and holding of territory as they did in Crimea seems dubious, they may well be effective in sowing confusion and disunity within NATO. The effects of this confusion and disunity may not produce immediate effects at the tactical level, but they stand to create a crisis of confidence in NATO with mid and long-term ramifications. This is the challenge that contributing nations must prepare to confront.



Members of Duke’s Company with the Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) Battle Group Latvia, wait for extraction during Exercise TOMAHAWK SOARING at the Meza Mackeviči Military Base, Latvia, 7 October 2018.

NOTES

- 1 Tomas Cizek, "Baltic States—How to react to 'New Warfare' in the Context of Article V?" *Slovak Journal of Political Sciences* 17:2 (2017), 186.
- 2 Iona-Nelia Bercean, "Ukraine: Russia's New Art of War," *Online Journal Modelling the New Europe* 21 (2016): 158.
- 3 Vladimir Rauta notes that the irregular forces were not homogenous; their motivations being political, monetary, or criminal. This paper is agnostic to their motivations. For purposes of this analysis, what matters is that they were sufficiently malleable to Russian interests. Vladimir Rauta, "Proxy agents, auxiliary forces, and sovereign defection: assessing the outcomes of using non-state actors in civil conflicts," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 16:1 (2016): 92. See also "Little Green Men": *A Primer on Modern Russian Unconventional Warfare, Ukraine 2013-2014* (Fort Bragg, NC: United States Army Special Operations Command, 2018), 43.
- 4 Oksona Syroyid, *Evidences of Russian Military Aggression Against Ukraine* (Lviv: NGO Prosvita Institute: 2019), 12-22; *Little Green Men': A Primer on Modern Russian Unconventional Warfare, Ukraine 2013-2014* (Fort Bragg, NC: United States Army Special Operations Command, 2018), 31.
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- 12 Mark Galeotti, "The Mythical 'Gerasimov Doctrine' and the Language of Threat," *Critical Studies on Security* 7:2 (2019): 157-158; Mark Galeotti, "I'm Sorry for Creating the 'Gerasimov Doctrine,'" *Foreign Policy*, 5 March 2018, accessed online at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/03/05/im-sorry-for-creating-the-gerasimov-doctrine/>.
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