

The New York Time's Ukraine Kremlinology: When Lack of Direct Evidence is Probably Proof of Russian Implication

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There is a tendency to believe that Russian president Vladimir Putin is orchestrating the unrest in eastern Ukraine, sending in irregular Russian forces to stir up pro-Russian separatist sentiment.

As guesses go, this might not be a bad one—but journalism is supposed to be about presenting evidence to confirm such speculation. The New York Times clearly has a hunch about deep Russian involvement in Ukraine. The ways it tries to confirm this hunch are curious.

Back in April, the Times got into some trouble ([FAIR Blog, 4/23/14](#)) with a “scoop” showing photos of people they claimed were Russian special forces and intelligence forces. A few days later, the Times was conveying skepticism about its own story—skepticism noticeably lacking in the original report.

But before long, the paper ([5/4/14](#)) was back on the case, reporting that “one persistent mystery has been the identity and affiliations of the militiamen, who have pressed the confrontation between Russia and the West into its latest bitter phase.”

The piece offered close look at one group of fighters associated with the People's Militia of the Donetsk People's Republic. “Moscow says they are Ukrainians and not part of the Russian armed forces,” the Times reported, while “Western officials and the Ukrainian government insist that Russians have led, organized and equipped the fighters.”

So what does reality say? The Times says that “neither portrayal captures the full story.” Then it goes on:

The rebels of the 12th Company appear to be Ukrainians but, like many in the region, have deep ties to and affinity for Russia. They are veterans of the Soviet, Ukrainian or Russian Armies, and some have families on the other side of the border. There is a tangled mix of identities and loyalties.

If these fighters are Ukrainian, and veterans of—not active duty members of—the Russian armed forces, then it would certainly seem that Moscow's explanation is closer to the truth than what “Western officials” are alleging about formal Russian control—unless there is evidence that they're not sharing.

The Times' interest in this story continues. "Russians Revealed Among Ukraine Fighters" was the [May 28](#) headline, but the story was less conclusive than that might suggest:

The scene at the hospital was new evidence that fighters from Russia are an increasingly visible part of the conflict here, a development that raises new questions about that country's role in the unrest. Moscow has denied that its regular soldiers are part of the conflict, and there is no evidence that they are. But motley assortments of fighters from other war zones that are intimately associated with Russia would be unlikely to surface against the powerful will of the Russian president, Vladimir V. Putin, experts said.

So the fighters raise "new questions" about Russian "role"-but there's no evidence the fighters are Russian soldiers. But Putin has such a "powerful will" that "motley assortments" of fighters wouldn't be there if he didn't want them to be there-so say the "experts."

As if that wasn't curious enough, the Times adds:

The disclosure of Russian nationals among the fighters here muddies an already murky picture of the complex connections and allegiances that are beginning to form. While their presence does not draw a straight line to the Kremlin, it raises the possibility of a more subtle Russian game that could keep Ukraine unbalanced for years.

So, to recap: There is no evidence that Russia is in control of any of this, but the lack of such evidence may be a sign of a "more subtle" game.

And then, one more-this past Sunday ([6/1/14](#)) brought the headline, "In Ukraine War, Kremlin Leaves No Fingerprints." In that piece, the Times reports that "eastern Ukraine is evolving into a subtle game in which Russian freelancers shape events and the Kremlin plausibly denies involvement."

While "Putin may not be directing these events...he is certainly their principal beneficiary." The Times also claims that "for now, at least, the strategy seems to be to destabilize Ukraine as much as possible without leaving conclusive evidence that would trigger more sanctions."

Again, some-or even all-of this could be true. But the Times doesn't seem to have the evidence to back up its claims of Russian management of the separatist movements or uprisings. The only time it presented anything that looked like such evidence, it had to retreat. Deep into the June 1 piece, the Times notes that a Russian investigative journalist thinks "does not believe that either Mr. Borodai or Mr. Strelkov"-those are the two separatists profiled-"is acting on behalf of the Russian government."

What you're left with from the Times is the suggestion that the lack of direct evidence is probably proof that Russia is up to something- i.e., "leaving no fingerprints."

During the days of the Soviet Union, Kremlinologists spent their time poring over state propaganda in an attempt to understand what was really going on in the USSR. It bears some resemblance to what one might be seeing in the New York Times now.

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