

The New York Times finds Russian spies in eastern Ukraine

By Alex Lantier
22 April 2014

The *New York Times* has run a relentless campaign of lies and distortions backing US policy in Ukraine. This has included portraying the opposition in eastern Ukraine to the pro-Western regime in Kiev as proof of an aggressive Russian intervention threatening Ukraine, Eastern Europe and the world.

The newspaper's article Monday, "Photos Link Masked Men in Eastern Ukraine to Russia," purports to provide definitive proof that Russian spies are active in eastern Ukraine and manipulating events there.

The article begins: "For two weeks, the mysteriously well-armed, professional gunmen known as 'green men' have seized Ukrainian government sites in town after town, igniting a brush fire of separatist unrest across eastern Ukraine. Strenuous denials from the Kremlin have closely followed each accusation by Ukrainian officials that the world was witnessing a stealthy invasion by Russian forces.

"Now, photographs and descriptions from eastern Ukraine endorsed by the Obama administration on Sunday suggest that many of the green men are indeed Russian military and intelligence forces—equipped in the same fashion as Russian special operations troops involved in annexing the Crimea region in February."

There may or may not be Russian agents in Ukraine, a question the *World Socialist Web Site* is not in a position to answer. However, even if the *Times* article proved its charge that Russian spies are active in Ukraine—which, as we will see, it does not—the reader would have a right to ask: So what?

CIA Director John Brennan went to Kiev a week ago, though he sought to hide his visit from the public, as the Western-backed regime in Kiev prepared its crackdown on the eastern Ukraine protests. British intelligence has admitted that its agents are combing east Ukraine. Why is the dispatching of spies to Ukraine by Russia more threatening than the appearance of MI6 or of Brennan, who has played a leading role in running a global network of torture camps and a program of drone murder?

Leaving these questions unasked and unanswered, the *Times* can write a fear-mongering piece covering up both the imperialist interests driving US policy and the hypocrisy of the American position. Washington and its European allies installed an unelected, anti-Russian government in Kiev by

backing a putsch in February spearheaded by the fascist Right Sector militia. During the protests leading up to the putsch, US officials boasted that they had spent \$5 billion on building up Ukrainian opposition groups.

Unsurprisingly, given that the protests were led by fascist groups based in western Ukraine against pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich, whose political base was in the east, this led to opposition to the new regime in eastern Ukraine.

The US regime-change plan in Ukraine was part of a broader policy decision to isolate Russia and treat it as a "pariah state," as the *Times* reported on Sunday—a designation previously reserved for countries targeted for US subversion or military attack such as Iraq, Libya, North Korea and Iran. This information is critical to enable the reader decide for himself whether it is Moscow or Washington, abetted by the *New York Times*, that is driving the Ukraine crisis.

The *Times* ignores all of these issues, focusing obsessively on the threat it claims Russian spies pose to Ukraine. Its approach to presenting the issue is indistinguishable from that of a state propaganda agency. It uncritically repeats, as "news," talking points from the military and the Obama administration, largely gleaned from Kiev's intelligence agencies, providing none of the political context necessary for readers to independently evaluate the claims of the generals and spies it quotes.

The *Times* extensively quotes General Philip M. Breedlove, the top military commander of NATO, who has pushed for a hard line against Russia in the crisis.

Breedlove argues that pro-Russian forces in eastern Ukraine "exhibit telltale military training and equipment," including Russian Army issue, which is not gear "that civilians would be likely to be able to get their hands on in large numbers." The *Times* writes that "General Breedlove conceded that such points, taken alone, might not prove much, 'but taken in the aggregate, the story is clear.'"

Breedlove's most significant comment is his admission that his own arguments do not prove anything. It is, of course, conceivable that the protests are driven by Russian army units that have infiltrated east Ukraine, even after Kiev sealed its border with Russia, somehow escaping detection by US spy satellites and electronic monitoring. The Russian army is hardly the only possible source of militarily trained manpower

in east Ukraine, however. Units of Ukraine's Berkut riot police and elements of its army, which has Russian-issue gear, have defected to the protesters.

Breedlove adds, "It's hard to fathom that groups of armed men in masks suddenly sprang forward from the population in eastern Ukraine and systematically began to occupy government facilities."

This comment unintentionally underscores the *Times'* boundless hypocrisy and the absurdity of its own presentation of the US-backed protests in Kiev that led up to the putsch. Only a few months ago, the newspaper depicted the groups of masked and armed fascist goons from Right Sector who stormed state buildings as the spearhead of a spontaneous popular uprising for democracy.

The heart of the *Times'* article is its presentation of photos and transcripts of audio recordings collected by Ukrainian intelligence that supposedly show the role of Russian forces in eastern Ukraine. What rapidly becomes clear, examining the paltry materials presented by the *Times*, is that they provide no hard proof of any of the newspaper's claims.

The dossier of photos, the *Times* writes, "features pictures taken in eastern Ukraine of unidentified gunmen and an earlier photograph of what looks like the same men, appearing in a group shot of a Russian military unit in Russia."

Examining the grainy, low-resolution photos published by the *Times*, one can only conclude that eastern Ukrainian protesters wear similar helmets, ski masks, and—occasionally—beards as do Russian soldiers. Like Breedlove's arguments, the photos prove nothing to anyone who approaches the far-right Kiev regime's claims with an ounce of skepticism. A Reddit user who examined the pictures released by the Ukrainian regime and the lower-resolution versions used by the New York Times concluded that the men in the Russian and east Ukrainian units are in fact different people (click here for the Reddit thread). This further raises the question of whether the *Times* was a party to a falsification of data, in order to prove a claim for which it has no evidence. It published images without doing the same level of fact-checking that was able to be carried out by someone with a few google searches.

In a comment posted to the paper's site, one of the many disgruntled readers of the *Times* article wrote: "These photos look as convincing as the satellite footage of Iraq's WMD [weapons of mass destruction] that CIA presented just before the invasion."

This footage, of course, proved nothing, as Iraq had no WMD. The Iraq war was then launched based on lies which the *Times* aggressively promoted.

Finally, the *Times* presents a YouTube clip of a cell phone call between "Strelok" (whom Ukrainian intelligence claims is an alias for an ethnic Russian active in the protests, Igor Strelkov) and his anonymous Russian superior. The two reportedly discuss how to hold territory and how to discuss the armed protesters' political positions with Russian media.

Since the release of this YouTube clip several days ago, a political analyst named Alexander Boroday has come forward and identified himself as the person on the phone with Strelok. He says he is a counselor for the pro-Russian government in Crimea and denies working for Russian intelligence. The *Times*, remarkably, does not report these developments to its readers.

It is conceivable that the Kremlin is running through Boroday a major operation on the scale of the US-backed Right Sector operation in Kiev. However, the *Times* offers no proof whatsoever to support such speculation.

One final point regarding the *Times'* alleged evidence. The Russian government and media have intercepted and published damning material on the role of US and European imperialism in Ukraine, involving publicly known, high-level officials.

During the Kiev protests, they recorded US State Department official Victoria Nuland and US Ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt plotting to install now-Prime Minister Arseniy Yatseniuk in power in Kiev. They later intercepted communications between EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton and Latvian officials, discussing the fact that protesters in Kiev were shot not by Yanukovich's forces, but by pro-Western forces.

Notwithstanding the massive electronic surveillance program it runs through the National Security Agency, the US government has manifestly been unable to discover material of even vaguely comparable significance.

The *Times'* supposed proof of Russian intervention in eastern Ukraine is a red herring. Its immediate political purpose is indicated in the article itself. The *Times* writes: "The question of Russia's role in eastern Ukraine has a critical bearing on the agreement reached Thursday in Geneva among Russian, Ukrainian, American and European diplomats to ease the crisis. American officials have said that Russia would be held responsible for ensuring that the Ukrainian government buildings were vacated, and that it could face new sanctions if the terms were not met."

Washington has no interest in defusing the crisis. It entered into the Geneva agreement in bad faith, intending to use Russia's supposed violation of the agreement to justify further sanctions and stepped up military provocations. By supposedly publishing "proof" that the protests in the east are manipulated by Russia, the *Times* is supplying the US government with propaganda to claim that the failure of the protesters to disband is Moscow's doing, which is to become the pretext for further escalating the crisis.

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