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In Ukraine's East, Russians Are Blending Right In



Pro-Russian militants stormed a police station on Monday in the city of Horlivka, near the Russian border. Credit Efrem Lukatsky/Associated Press

In a video posted online Monday, a man wearing an unmarked green uniform calls to attention a squad of Ukrainian policemen who have just switched over to the pro-Russian side in this eastern Ukrainian town.

The uniformed man is one of hundreds of militants who have seized government buildings in eastern Ukraine. His identity soon becomes clear, a rarity in a mixed force of uncertain origin or origins. Some of the men are well armed and disciplined, leading to Western assertions that they are not merely equipped or inspired by Russia but in fact Russian soldiers, as was the case in the occupation of Crimea, where they became known as the Green Men.

Yet in eastern Ukraine, the Green Men are different; many or even most appear to be locals.

Still, some ties to Russia are unmistakable. In the video posted Monday, when the uniformed man at the police station identifies himself as a lieutenant colonel, a policeman asks, “a lieutenant colonel of what?”

“Lieutenant colonel of the Russian Army,” the man replies. “Good afternoon, men.”

It was a rare moment of clarity. Journalists who watched the video, posted on YouTube and titled “Horlivka police go over to the occupiers,” had seen the same man outside the police building earlier in the day.

Typically, however, confusion reigns. In nine towns in eastern Ukraine, government buildings, including the police station here, are now occupied by pro-Russian militants whose

ranks may or may not include Russian soldiers. Protesters milling about outside the Horlivka station swore that only local men had entered the building, to depose a police chief appointed by the new government in Kiev.

Through the years, the Russian military and its Soviet predecessor proved adept at concealment and subterfuge, a finely honed concept known as maskirovka, or masking.

Soviet maps often showed what appeared to be useful roads that in fact led into swamps. The Russian military makes, and in fact sells for export, inflatable versions of most of its tanks and rocket launchers, to trick spotter planes. And through the conflicts in Chechnya and Georgia, Russia's ground forces have sharpened their tactics for working alongside, and blending in with, local proxy forces.

In eastern Ukraine, the militants did not wear Russia's latest uniform and infantry gear, known as the Ratnik kit, for the Russian word for warrior, as the so-called Green Men did in Crimea. The uniforms were mismatched, the weapons older. Even the men in masks, by their build and demeanor, appeared to be older than most enlisted men.

Their activities vary from place to place. In Slovyansk, where residents say Russian special forces were present when the police station was stormed and later handed out a store of weapons, separatists are in complete control and have set up roadblocks. In other towns, aside from the takeover of some public buildings, life seems to proceed with a fair degree of normalcy.

In Horlivka, the seizure of the police station on Monday unfolded in an unruly manner, with dozens of townsmen hurling rocks and using chair legs to smash windows while onlookers cheered, witnesses said. It was hardly a military operation — at least before the lieutenant colonel took charge.

"This protest was spontaneous," a man who offered only his first name, Aleksandr, said in an interview later. "Look around. Nobody is paid and nobody is Russian." All the same, he let his sympathies be known. "It's not the Russian Army that is an occupier, but the Ukrainian Army."

In New York, the American ambassador to the United Nations, Samantha Power, drew parallels between the actions in the east of Ukraine and in Crimea. The uniforms and weapons of the pro-Russian militants, she said, resembled those of the Russian soldiers deployed on the Crimean Peninsula.

Ms. Power, speaking on Sunday, offered another argument for a Russian hand in the latest unrest: The towns and cities where separatists have descended are strategically situated on highways separating the eastern provinces from Kiev, the capital. That, she said, indicated a plan of some sort.

All the same, an emphasis on a Russian military role discounts the genuine discontent among a portion of the population in eastern Ukraine. And some of the political and business elites of the Donets Basin, an industrial and coal-producing region in the east that is the base of support of the former president, Viktor F. Yanukovich, felt that they had much to lose after he was deposed in February.

"What we are seeing is a resurgence of the corrupt leadership of the Yanukovich government, with backing from Russia," said Viktor I. Butko, chief editor of Zlagada, a weekly newspaper in Slovyansk whose offices were raided by pro-Russian militants on Sunday. Those who barged in, he said, included local people but also Russian military men. Rather than shut down the newspaper, it turned out that they wanted to find a way onto the roof for one of their snipers.

"A Green Man was in my office yesterday," Mr. Butko said. "He stood right here. He was a Russian and a Russian officer and I am certain of it. I lived 66 years in this town, and I know: These men were not from my town."

"What's scary here is the possibility of a third world war. That's what's scary," he added. "Russia doesn't care about the opinion of the West. If it did, I would not have had a Russian paratrooper in my office yesterday."

