

DEVELOPMENTS IN RUSSIAN SPECIAL OPERATIONS

RUSSIA'S *SPETSNAZ*, SOF AND
SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES COMMAND

DR. CHRISTOPHER MARSH



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FOREWORD

The Canadian Special Operations Forces Command (CANSOFCOM) Education & Research Centre (ERC) continues to publish monographs and books of interest to the CANSOF community, as well as those in the national defence and security sectors. As such, this latest publication, *Developments in Russian Special Operations: Russia's Spetsnaz, SOF and Special Operations Forces Command* should prove to be both timely and of topical interest.

The monograph is written by Dr. Christopher Marsh, a recognized expert in Russian special operations forces and defense issues. *Developments in Russian Special Operations* provides an excellent overview of the various Russian organizations that are captured under the Russian "SOF umbrella," as well as their new special operations command. In addition, Marsh provides some background history, as well as analysis of Russian SOF's operations in the Ukraine. His insight into the murky world of Russian SOF is a welcome addition to the ERC monograph series.

As always, the intent of the ERC monograph series is to provide interesting professional development material that will assist individuals in the Command, as well as those external to it, to learn more about human behaviour, special operations, and military theory and practice. I hope you find this publication informative and of value to your operational role. In addition, it is intended to spark discussion, reflection and debate. Please do not hesitate to contact the ERC should you have comments or topics that you would like to see addressed as part of the CANSOFCOM monograph series.

Dr. Emily Spencer

Series Editor and CANSOFCOM ERC Director of Education & Research

DEVELOPMENTS IN RUSSIAN SPECIAL OPERATIONS

On 6 March 2013 General Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the Russian General Staff, announced the creation of Russia's own Special Operations Command (SOCOM) and Special Operations Forces (SOF). "Having studied the practice of the formation, training, and application of special operations by the leading foreign powers," he stated, "the leadership of the Ministry of Defense has also begun to create such forces." He continued, "We have set up a special command, which has already begun to put our plans into practice as part of the Armed Forces training program. We have also developed a set of key documents that outline the development priorities, the training program, and the modalities of using these new forces."¹

Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu also commented on this momentous occasion. In developing a Special Operations Command, he said, Russia was following "the general trend [in the world] toward specialization and enhanced mobility."² Indeed, in commenting on the development, one Russian news agency pointed out that Russia was only 26 years behind the United States (US) in developing such a command, in addition to being behind other Western countries, including Germany, France, and Canada.³

There are many reasons why Russia is so delayed in developing special operations forces as well as a separate command. The previous minister of defense of the Russian Federation, Anatoly Serdyukov, had apparently been supportive of the idea, but developments were kept quiet under his leadership. Once he was ousted on criminal charges and replaced by Sergei Shoigu, however, the latter picked up the ball and ran with it, quickly putting into place all the necessary components. Pieces of the puzzle had

begun to be assembled apparently as far back as 2008-2009, in the wake of the 2008 Russo-Georgian war. With Serdyukov's replacement by Shoigu, any existing obstacles were apparently cleared and developments began to move quickly.

It was clearly under General Nikolai Makarov, the previous chief of the Russian General Staff (2008-2012), however, that a Russian Special Operations Command had been first seriously considered, along with the formation of Russian special operations forces, as distinct from Russia's long-time *spetsnaz*. Makarov had been instrumental in initiating studies on US and Western special operations structures and forces, specifically the study "of special operations by the leading foreign powers" mentioned above. These "studies" refer to at least two major works on SOF in general and Western SOF in particular. The first is the book *Spetsnaz Rossii (Spetsnaz of Russia)* by Vladimir Kvachkov, a retired Russian *spetsnaz* colonel who was tasked by the Ministry of Defense with investigating the possibility of developing a Russian special operations command and accompanying forces, as well as a guiding theory and principles.⁴

In his book, Kvachkov argues that the losses in the Cold War, namely Afghanistan and in Chechnya, cannot be considered losses at all, since the Russians were fighting conventionally and they won conventional battles. But he admits, there were other battles going on, those "by special means," and those they lost – in fact, they hardly realized they were engaged in them. As a result, he argued that Russia needs a theory of special operations. This theory would provide "a system of knowledge that describes, explains and predicts the category, laws and principles of war by special methods."⁵

Kvachkov made further recommendations about what Russian SOF units should be tasked with, their composition, and their placement relative to conventional forces. The most provocative

recommendation is perhaps his recommendation that SOF comprise 5-7 percent of all forces.⁶ It is unclear if at this point he was thinking that SOF would replace *spetsnaz* (which I assume to be the case given the numbers), or if he pictured a separate SOF element that itself comprised that enormous of a sum.

Though an interesting read, the book is only part of the story. According to *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, Colonel Kvachkov, who had served in Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and Chechnya, along with a group of colleagues in 2004-2005, had carefully developed a plan for the establishment of a special operations command and presented it to the then-Chief of the General Staff, Yuri Baluyevsky. The latter was apparently largely pleased with the project, but when the plan made its way to the then head of the GRU (Main Intelligence Directorate, or *Glavnoye razvedyvatel'noye upravleniye*), which was to be responsible for the creation of the new unit, it apparently hit a dead end. It was then decided that the new organization would report directly to the General Staff, bypassing the GRU.⁷ Only days after being approved, Kvachkov was arrested in connection with the attempted assassination of influential political opposition leader Anatoly Chubais.⁸ The issue was then apparently put on the back burner.⁹

We know less about the second study, other than that it was an internal document initiated by General Nikolai Makarov, who took office in 2008, a few years after this incident. This study centred on the experiences of the US, German, and other Western special operations forces. Apparently, the senior leaders of the Russian military community were “greatly impressed by the physical fitness, special training, psychological resilience, and discipline of Western special operations soldiers,” particularly how well they were trained in advanced tactics.¹⁰

As a result, when General Gerasimov states that they have been studying SOF and Western SOF, we have at least two concrete

documents we can turn to. These documents show interest and some degree of knowledge, and they serve as the prefix to what would come later, the development of Russia's Special Operations Forces Command (*Komandovanie sil spetsial'nalnykh operatsii*, or KSSO) and Russian SOF (or *sily spetsial'nykh operatsii*, or SSO).

This monograph is about the development of both Russia's special operations forces command and its forces, including its history, structure, recruitment, training, and employment. It necessarily begins with some historical background on Russia's special units, focusing on its premier *spetsnaz* units, which in many ways had parallel development inside the Soviet Union and later Russia with the development of special operations forces abroad (including US Special Forces and the United Kingdom's (UK) Special Air Service (SAS)).¹¹ Additionally, Russian SOF are not replacing *spetsnaz*. Rather, they are a new set of elite special units with distinct roles to play in Russia's current operating environment, ranging from counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operations, both at home and abroad, to training and equipping missions with foreign militaries. Finally, the study considers what the future might hold in store for relations between Russian SOF and *spetsnaz*, Russia's special operations command, and their employment in the future operating environment.

SOVIET SPETSNAZ AND THE ROOTS OF RUSSIAN SOF

The roots of Russia's SOF rest with the Soviet *spetsnaz* units. The term *spetsnaz* comes from *voiska spetsial'nogo naznacheniya*, or special designation troops. Though most *spetsnaz* units are certainly elite and distinct from conventional forces, they are not the same thing as SOF, despite the frequent confusion by commentators. Nor are they simply the equivalent to US Special Forces, despite the fact that until recently they have nearly been synonymous terms. To translate *spetsnaz* as Special Forces is a

gross – and misleading – oversimplification and will only lead to confusion since US Army Special Forces are only one part of the US Army SOF community (others being, for example, Rangers, psychological operations and civil affairs). And of course, each of the other US services have their own special operators (Air Force combat controllers, Navy SEALs, etc.). To put things simply, all SOF are *spetsnaz*, but not all *spetsnaz* are SOF.

There is even greater diversity within Russian *spetsnaz* than there is within the US SOF community, because unlike in the US and most NATO countries, where special operations units are limited to the departments of defense, this is not the case in Russia. There, the ministry of interior, Federal Security Service (FSB, the offspring of the old KGB, or Committee of State Security, *Komitet Gosudarstvennoi Bezopasnosti*), and other divisions have their own *spetsnaz* units. As Russian military experts Lester Grau and Charles Bartles from the US Army's Foreign Military Studies Office clearly explain it, "The word 'special' [in *spetsnaz*] is used in a very broad way that can indicate that the unit has a very narrow area of specialization, such as signals intelligence, engineering, reconnaissance, etc.; or the unit is experimental or temporary in nature; or the unit conducts tasks of special importance such as sensitive political or clandestine operations. This broad usage of the term means that '*spetsnaz*' cannot be thought of as equating to the Western concept of Special Operations Forces (SOF)."¹²

This distinction is certainly true, and I would argue that this opinion is even held by the Russian Ministry of Defense, which is why they are now developing their own SOF units, *sily spetsial'nykh operatsii*, or SSO. But this is a new phenomenon and one that is only in its earliest stages of development. To understand the environment in which Russia's new SOF are being developed, we need to look back to the history of the Soviet and Russian *spetsnaz*.

Soviet Spetsnaz

The earliest actual *spetsnaz* units were formed in 1950, though it is worth mentioning the role of special-type units during the Russian Revolution (1917-1921). As scholar John Dziak observes, while there is no “unbroken link” between such special units and later *spetsnaz*, the former are often viewed as the conceptual forerunner.¹³ All Russian *spetsnaz* and SOF trace their heritage back to the *razvedchiki* (reconnaissance scouts) of the Revolutionary War. These soldiers served as behind-the-lines commando elements, providing much-needed intelligence on enemy positions and capabilities, a critical function given the nature of the war the Red Army was fighting.

The most significant of the special units of the Revolutionary period was the ChON, or special purpose brigades (*Chasti osobogo naznachenya*), which by the end of the war numbered some 40,000 soldiers.¹⁴ This was an elite formation formed from broader categories of existing specialized forces.¹⁵ As an ideological movement, the Bolsheviks recruited from among the most loyal and “believing” Communist soldiers to serve in the ChON. Their mission was two-fold. First, they acted as counterintelligence agents at home and in occupied territories, ensuring that those in the ranks were in fact good Communists. And secondly, they served as sabotage, assassination, and agitation assets behind enemy lines.¹⁶ These were the first units to be given the label “special designation.”¹⁷

The Soviets started experimenting with elite reconnaissance and sabotage units during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), and employed such units in the Soviet-Finnish War (1939-1940), as well as in Romania, Yugoslavia, and Belarus during the Second World War.¹⁸ But the real roots of Russia’s special operators lay with the partisan fighters who fought the German forces that invaded

the Soviet Union in World War II. These loosely organized units were tied to the Partisan Directorate, which officially was under the Supreme High Command. Though they did not have the term *spetsnaz*, they were resistance fighters of all types (including naval infantry and even sappers) who organized as best as they could to halt the German advance into the Soviet motherland, to support conventional forces when the opportunity arose, and to organize guerilla operations if behind enemy lines. This latter was a crucial role for the partisans during World War II, or as it is known in Russia, the Great Patriotic War.

As Dziak explains, the Soviets viewed their partisan experience in the Great Patriotic War as a highly effective “unconventional” adjunct to their conventional operations. The Soviets claim that during the war partisans killed, wounded, or took prisoner “hundreds of thousands of German troops, collaborators, and officials of the occupation administration.” They also claim to have derailed more than 18,000 trains, and destroyed or damaged thousands of trains and tens of thousands of rail cars. These operations supposedly had a devastating effect on German morale, and forced the Germans to deflect much-needed resources from frontal operations.¹⁹

The real era of the *spetsnaz*, however, was the Cold War. The Soviets developed the first *spetsnaz* in 1950 – two years prior to the formation of US Special Forces.²⁰ In the Soviet Union’s attempt to keep up with US military developments, the Kremlin put a tremendous amount of effort into their *spetsnaz* and special operations capabilities as they tried to outflank the West at all levels across the political-military spectrum.²¹ Methods included covert and clandestine activities of all kinds, with particular emphasis on insurgencies, active measures/deception operations,²² psychological operations, and even support for terrorist organizations around the world.²³

Spetsnaz squads were trained to be dispatched to reconnoitre in the enemy rear area to locate nuclear delivery systems, enemy forces, headquarters, airfields, signal sites and other important targets.²⁴ They were also trained for and prepared to conduct raids, ambushes, sabotage, and surgical strike operations against key enemy personnel and infrastructure, and to conduct reconnaissance/intelligence operations at the same time.²⁵ Moscow's capabilities were augmented by proxy forces where possible, especially when direct Soviet involvement might be imprudent.

Despite this training, beginning in 1979, Soviet *spetsnaz* found themselves operating in a very different environment – that of Afghanistan. *Spetsnaz* were involved from the very beginning, with Colonel Vassily Kolesnik who was tasked with recruiting a “Moslem battalion” of *spetsnaz* of Tajik, Turkmen, or Uzbek nationality, with the idea being that its members could pass themselves off as Afghans. The unit had been assembled by June 1979 and began training, though they did not know what their mission was to be. During the December 1979 invasion of Afghanistan their role was to penetrate the imperial palace and facilitate the infiltration of two other *spetsnaz* units – Kaskad and Zenit. These units were the lead in conducting “operation 333,” killing President Amin and those loyal to his rule.²⁶

Unfortunately, the operation was not a complete success, and several Soviet advisors of Amin were killed during the assault. As Russian defense analyst Alexey Nikolsky describes it, “it was a rather poorly prepared, shambolic affair,”²⁷ with different units from different branches of the military and security services needing to be brought together to generate the necessary capabilities to conduct the operation.

As the war in Afghanistan dragged on, *spetsnaz* units found themselves carrying out a variety of missions again unlike those for

which they had been trained as Cold Warriors. By October 1980, they were increasingly being brought in to supplement the Limited Contingent of Soviet Forces in Afghanistan. There, their skills for such activities as reconnaissance, ambush, and rapid reaction were put to regular use. Some *spetsnaz* also became involved in “Stinger” hunting missions, once the US-made, shoulder-fired missile was introduced into the war zone. These Stinger hunters sought out Mujahideen equipped with such missiles and did their best to destroy both the missile and the associated unit. This was one way the Soviets countered the introduction of the Stinger missiles into the war. The others were by flying their helicopters higher and at night, both of which proved quite effective, but with greater civilian casualties due to less accuracy in their delivery of ordnance.

Overall, during their ten-year struggle against the Mujahideen, the Soviets deployed a significant SOF capability based around their highly-trained *spetsnaz* units. A critical examination of their performance by Canadian military officer Tony Balasevicius, however, reveals that Soviet SOF were often misemployed and, as a result, were unable to make a significant contribution to the outcome of the war.²⁸ This misemployment, Balasevicius argues, was based on the Kremlin’s desire to focus SOF efforts on propping up their under-prepared conscript army rather than trying to identify how *spetsnaz* might contribute to a grander operational vision for success. Thus, in the end, they served as key enablers but were not tasked with the proper missions and given the correct resources, including an appropriate amount of time to meet operational and strategic demands.²⁹

Spetsnaz in the Post-Soviet Era

The two wars in Chechnya were the crucible for Russia’s *spetsnaz* much like the war in Afghanistan had been for Soviet *spetsnaz*.

Often employed simply as elite infantry, they were also tasked with targeting and eliminating high value targets, in this case rebel leaders of the Chechen independence movement that sought to remove the territory from the Russian Federation. These rebel leaders were not just untrained farmers, however, and included in their ranks many former Soviet/Russian soldiers and even some former *spetsnaz*. This expertise obviously greatly problematized the Chechen wars, and the losses were considerable.

At the start of the first Chechen war (1994-1996), *spetsnaz* found themselves in their usual role of battlefield reconnaissance. But once the illusion of a quick victory disappeared – and it disappeared very quickly – many *spetsnaz* found themselves being used as shock troops. In fact, Moscow sought capable fighting forces from wherever it could, including naval *spetsnaz* and even the ministry of the interior's OMON (*Otryad Mobilny Osobogo Naznacheniya*, or Special Purpose Mobility Unit) counter-riot units. Moscow was greatly relieved when retired General Alexander Lebed was able to negotiate a ceasefire in 1996 in the wake of the presidential elections, after he himself made a strong running for the presidency.³⁰

The second Chechen war (1999-2002) was different from the first in many ways. The most notable was the fact that what had been a nationalist separatist movement had developed into a Muslim religious war for independence.³¹ The other difference was that Moscow's invasion of Chechnya was well thought-out and was much more successful than the first. The ground invasion was preceded by an initial air campaign, softening targets and preparing troops for effective operations.

From the fall of 1999 all the way through 2009, Moscow directed a sustained campaign that effectively destroyed the Islamic insurgency in Chechnya and reasserted Russian control of the region.³²

The *spetsnaz* performed their usual roles of deep reconnaissance, interdiction, intelligence gathering, and acting as a rapid reaction unit. Contrary to the first Chechen war, this time-around *spetsnaz* were used, for the most part, in their trained roles and performed well.

One of the most notorious of *spetsnaz* units, not just during the Chechen wars but throughout its existence, is that of the GRU, the Main Intelligence Directorate. Most direct action and reconnaissance *spetsnaz* units have historically been under the command and control of the GRU, which reports directly to the General Staff.³³ During the Cold War, their mission-sets focused on deep reconnaissance and countering weapons of mass destruction, particularly battlefield tactical nuclear weapons, and especially in the event of a war in which Soviet territory was immediately overrun. These units would then be stay-behind forces, conducting sabotage operations, diversion activities, and countering tactical nuclear weapons.

Not all *spetsnaz* fall under the military (or Ministry of Defense). Other very significant *spetsnaz* units were (and still are) found in other organs of the state. In 1974, the Soviet Union created one of its most elite tier 1 special operations units, *Alfa* (Alpha). *Alfa* was the premier counter-terrorist unit in the Soviet Union under the control of the KGB (Committee on State Security), contrary to most *spetsnaz*, which fall under the GRU. Today *Alfa* still exists, and is still just as elite, though it is now under the reorganized and renamed KGB, known as the FSB (Federal Security Service). Also under the FSB, and just as elite and lethal, is *Vympel* (pennant), which also has a counter-terrorist role, although the Unit is most well-known for its unconventional warfare skills.

Notably, by the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the term “*spetsnaz*” when used in reference to the Soviet Union’s elite

combat units usually referred to the GRU's *Spetsnaz* Brigades and Combat Swimmer units (roughly the GRU's naval reconnaissance force with a sabotage/anti-sabotage capability), the Russian Airborne's 45th *Spetsnaz* Regiment (later brigade), or select elite anti-terrorist units (such as the FSB's Alpha and *Vympel* mentioned above).³⁴ But not all *spetsnaz* are as elite as these units. In fact, there are *spetsnaz* units across Russia's service agencies, including first responders, police units, and even in jails and courtrooms.³⁵ Indeed, Russia has seen a virtual proliferation of *spetsnaz* units across the country, even if often there is not much of substance to the label.

EMULATION OF US AND WESTERN SOF

Despite its long history with *spetsnaz* and other elite units (such as its Airborne troops), Russia is now emulating US models when it comes to special operations. As Russian defense analyst Dmitry Trenin has phrased it, "Moscow has long been looking at U.S. Special Operations forces as a model for its own SOCOM," while "the Russian MOD [Ministry of Defense] takes its cue from the Pentagon – whenever the circumstances and the means allow it."³⁶ How far back this phenomenon goes is an interesting topic in itself, but the focus here is on contemporary emulation.

The first clear example of this contemporary emulation is Russia's development of a Special Operations Forces Command. Beginning in fits and spurts since approximately 2008-2009, the Command was only made public to the world in 2013. Russian Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu said that in developing such a command they were following "the general trend [in the world] toward specialization and enhanced mobility."³⁷

Over the past quarter-century, SOF have become the force of choice not just for the US, but for an increasingly large number of states in

the international system. As strategist Colin Gray phrases it in his well-known work on future warfare, “SOF will enjoy a golden era in many countries” in the 21st century.³⁸ This phenomenon is two-fold. First, there is the emulation of Western-type SOF units and structures by both allies and adversaries. Secondly, there is the increased use of SOF for a wide range of missions. For example, in many countries unhindered by *posse comitatus*,³⁹ ministry of defense SOF units engage in domestic counter-terrorism (CT) and counter-insurgency (COIN) operations, blurring the lines between law enforcement and military operations.

The phenomenon of the global proliferation of SOF is not due to different countries re-inventing the wheel, so to speak, but rather it is a result of emulation. In the case of Russia, for example, there is the possibility that it could have innovated and come up with a unique set of structures to face their unique military challenges, but they failed to do so. Norwegian scholar Tor Bukkvoll is correct in pointing out that failures often lead to innovation, and certainly Russia has had its share of failures.⁴⁰ Beslan⁴¹ and the Nord Ost theatre⁴² attack are two prime examples of where *spetsnaz* units – indeed the joint force – failed, mostly due to breakdowns in command and control, as well as inter-service rivalry,⁴³ and the non-existence of a functioning Russian interagency framework.

Much like the American catastrophe at Desert One during Operation Eagle Claw in 1980, when a failed attempt to rescue American hostages being held in Iran resulted in the death of eight special operators, the Beslan and Nord Ost tragedies could have provided a pretext to look at out how Russia’s elite units functioned as a joint force and the problems they faced, particularly in joint command and control, but also in interagency operations (a concept wholly unfamiliar to the Russian context). But Russia did not draw lessons from these catastrophes. In fact, these failures were covered up and the events were heralded as successes for Russian military

units, particularly its *spetsnaz*. In short, there was no subsequent Goldwater-Nichols legislation⁴⁴ for Russia following these events (despite the fact that some – such as Colonel Kvachkov – were calling for much-needed reforms to address these very issues).

Instead, Russia began to emulate Western SOF structures during its “New Look” military reforms in the late 2000s as discussed in the introduction. One does not need to look far for theorizing about countries emulating the practices of others. The international relations school of realism has dealt with the topic rather significantly. Eminent political science scholar Kenneth Waltz phrased it thus in his seminal work on structural realism: “states tend to emulate the successful policies of others” in the international system.⁴⁵ As Professor Jeffrey Taliaferro puts it, Waltz essentially argues that the international system provides incentives for states – especially the great powers – “to adopt similar adaptive strategies or risk elimination as independent entities.” Furthermore, “states tend to emulate the military, technological, and governing practices of the most successful states in the system.”⁴⁶

Other scholars have researched innovation and adaptation, and in so doing touched upon the phenomenon of emulation, but only as a secondarily important phenomenon explaining the nature of particular cases of adaptation.⁴⁷ In brief, according to this line of thinking, emulation is a type of adaptation. As Professor Adam Grissom phrases it, “The sources of such changes can be progressive senior service leaders, external shocks or *emulation of innovation taking place in other countries*” (emphasis added).⁴⁸ What greater evidence of emulation than the two facts that, first, they created a command for their Special Operations Forces, and secondly, that they attributed their actions to following the leading powers of the world?

RUSSIA'S SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES COMMAND

The Development of KSSO

Russian reforms were carried out between 2008-2012 and culminated in the establishment of Russia's own Special Operations Forces Command. However, the Command was only made public in 2013. The first piece of the puzzle was the establishment in 2009 of the Directorate of Special Operations (*Upravlenie Spetsial'nykh Operatsii*) on the basis of Unit 92154 based out of a training centre in Solnechnogorsk, near lake Senezh (hence, the location becoming known as Senezh). The special operators there gained the nickname "*podsolnukhi*" (sunflowers), a nickname they apparently picked up while fighting in Chechnya. One of the founding fathers was the then-Chief of the General Staff, General of the Army Anatoly Kvashnin. This Unit had seen significant combat in Chechnya during the Second Chechen War, as discussed above.

The second piece of the puzzle was the establishment of a second centre in Kubinka-2, also on the outskirts of the Moscow region. This centre was directly under the control of the GRU and hence it retained its *spetsnaz* designation, being named the Centre of Special Designation (*Tsentr Spetsial'nogo Naznacheniya*). It came to be known as Kubinka, or unofficially, Kuba (Cuba).

Then finally, on 1 April 2012, upon the initiative of General Makarov, the Directorate of Special Operations was renamed the Special Operations Forces Command (*Komandovanie sil spetsial'nalnykh operatsii*, or KSSO). Subsequently, on 15 March 2013 Kubinka was joined to the special operations forces. As early as 2012 Makarov had been talking about forming a KSSO, with plans for up to nine special-purpose brigades and expansion of the existing system of military intelligence special forces (GRU *Spetsnaz*).⁴⁹ Intensive physical plant development at both Kubinka and Senezh then

began, including infrastructure for basing and military training. Senezh also houses a sniper training school, and both seem to have diver training facilities, though Kubinka apparently includes a special naval operations directorate that controls several special naval operations departments and squads.⁵⁰ There is also a cold weather/mountaineering training centre at Mount Elbrus named “Terskol,” in Kalbardino-Balkariya that is used by Russian special operators for training.⁵¹

Recruitment, Selection, and Training

As for the manning of these units, although Russia has *spetsnaz* units it could just pull from, they are not just renaming *spetsnaz* as SOF. Rather, they are selecting the very best from their regular army, particularly their reconnaissance units, having them first serve with *spetsnaz* units, and then having them undergo specialized training. Only then do they get designated as Russian special operators.⁵² This emphasis on quality special operators speaks to General Gerasimov’s comment above about the high quality of the US and Western SOF they encountered in their studies.

To further grow the force, periodically, advertisements are placed in the military enlistment offices. In addition, each month on the 15th at 0900 hours candidates can volunteer to try to pass the entrance test. The physical fitness portion of the qualification includes the following: three kilometre (km) run in 12:00-12:30; 100 metre (m) run in 13.0-14.0 seconds, and at least 18 pull-ups, plus passing a physical examination.

Once selected, officers and non-commissioned officers arrive at Senezh, where they undertake a rigorous entrance examination which tests the physical conditioning of the SSO operators, but also personality and – perhaps most importantly – the ability to work as a team. The basic principle of Senezh is not to prepare

an individual fighter with great skills and abilities, but rather to build teams that can act as a single organism.⁵³ The Senezh Centre is marked by the fact that it builds a culture of teamwork among its trainees, and this is increasingly a factor in recruitment – namely, the ability of each candidate to work in a team.

The training of the officer recruit special operators is carried out in the Ryazan Higher Airborne Command School – RVVDKU (department of special and military intelligence and the department of the use of special forces) and the Novosibirsk Higher Military Command School – NVVKU (department of special intelligence and the chair of the special reconnaissance and airborne training). All “sunflowers” learn skydiving, mountaineering, swimming and scuba diving, and storming buildings and homes. Additionally, depending on the individual tasks the soldiers are being prepared for, the training is more in-depth.⁵⁴

Moreover, it should be added that unlike other *spetsnaz* units that are seen as elite forces that perform missions (e.g. reconnaissance, direct action, etc.) for the sole purpose of furthering the movement and manoeuvre of conventional forces,⁵⁵ the structure of Russia’s new SOF units suggests that they are intended to act independently. For that purpose, the Command has a dedicated special aviation brigade that directly controls combat aviation assets at Torzhok, and a squadron of the Il-72 transport aircraft at the Migalovo airfield near Tver.

The Command also has supporting elements that provide Combat Support and Combat Service Support functions.⁵⁶ Additionally, Russian analyst Aleksey Nikolskiy reports that the Senezh compound has a large helipad that can accommodate three Mi-26 heavy transport helicopters (each one capable of carrying 70 soldiers with kit). He therefore concludes that this capability could indicate that about 200 soldiers are on duty at any given

time at SSO unit 92154.⁵⁷ He also calculates that between Senezh and Kubinka there are approximately between 2,000 and 2,500 total special operators.⁵⁸

Leadership, Command and Control

The KSSO reports directly to the General Staff, to Major-General Alexander Miroshnichenko, previously the head of the FSB's *Alfa* squadron, though at the time of writing there is speculation that he has been replaced. In addition, the SSO is commanded directly by an individual, though we currently do not know who that person is. Previously it was Aleksey Dyumin, former Chief of the Presidential Security Service (whose career has skyrocketed ever since).⁵⁹

According to Grau and Bartles, the most striking aspect of the Command is that it appears more of a branch proponent than an actual functional Command.⁶⁰ One very interesting aspect of the Command is that it reports directly to the General Staff of the Russian Federation, not the Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU), as do the *spetsnaz* brigades. Moreover, it was placed in direct operational control of only certain specific special operations forces, rather than, as had been suggested by some, overseeing special operations as a whole, including GRU *spetsnaz* units, Navy *spetsnaz*, and the 45th *spetsnaz* Airborne regiment.

Doctrine, Missions, and Activities

The KSSO is reportedly tasked with standardizing doctrine and capabilities for Russia's premiere SOF units in all military forces, and is supposed to have the capability to provide command and control for these units in wartime.⁶¹ The Russian Ministry of Defense defines the term "special operation" as follows:

the special operation of troops (forces) is a complex of special actions of troops (forces), coordinated by objectives and tasks, time and place of execution, conducted according to a single concept and plan in order to achieve certain goals. Special actions of troops (forces) are activities carried out by specially designated, organized, trained and equipped forces, which apply methods and ways of fighting not typical for conventional forces (special reconnaissance, sabotage, counter-terrorist, counter-sabotage, counter-intelligence, guerrilla, counter-guerrilla and other activities).⁶²

The greatest distinctions between US SOF missions and activities and those of Russian SOF is the inclusion of sabotage and counter-sabotage operations. Most other missions are similar, if only worded differently. For example, due to their experience with partisan fighters in World War II, the Russians have retained the concept of guerilla (*partizanskie*) and counter-guerrilla (*antipartizanskie*) operations instead of developing a concept of insurgency and counter-insurgency warfare. Likewise, their understanding of guerilla warfare is very close to the US concept of unconventional warfare (UW), especially when it comes to the training of foreign fighters in the conduct of guerilla warfare.

Military correspondent Alexander Sladkov, while visiting military exercises in the mountains of the North Caucasus, articulated the goals and objectives of Russia's special operations forces as follows:

Special Operations Forces (SSO) – troops intended to achieve political and economic goals in any geographical part of the world of interest to the Russian Federation.... They come in cases when diplomatic methods are no longer active. Distracting forces and the attention of certain countries by external problems, problems creating

them inside, rocking the political systems of these countries, destabilizing the situation, including through a 'third hand.' Special Operations Forces create, train, and supervise foreign guerrilla movements, eliminate unwanted leaders without any sanctions on foreign soil, and so on... Russian experts' main task is the protection of our citizens abroad, the release of Russians who have fallen hostage somewhere in distant areas, and protecting the interests of our country.⁶³

As Nikolsky summarizes in his excellent study of Russian SOF, Moscow's SOF units are "proper combat units themselves and can operate independently. They are ready for rapid deployment across a spectrum of counter-terrorism and combat missions, on Russian territory and abroad."⁶⁴

RUSSIAN *SPETSNAZ* AND SOF IN ACTION

The Kremlin did not create Russian special operators and a SOF Command just because other countries in the world had done so. They did so with the full intent of using them in missions for which their conventional forces and perhaps existing *spetsnaz* units were incapable of acting independently. But that does not mean that they cannot and/or have not operated alongside *spetsnaz* and conventional forces. Indeed, they have. The most notorious operations they have been involved in have been the seizure of Crimea and the fighting in eastern Ukraine. They have also been involved in the civil war in Syria and reportedly even in anti-piracy operations off the Horn of Africa, while they are continuously engaged in counter-terrorism/counter-insurgency operations in the North Caucasus. They also performed critical security operations during the Sochi Olympics.

Crimea

Though they undoubtedly played important counter-terrorism roles during the Sochi winter Olympics, the real debut of Russian SOF was the military occupation of Crimea on 27 February 2014 by “little green” – and polite – men. Of course, their involvement began at least several days beforehand, most likely on the 24th (we know, for example, that the 45th Airborne *Spetsnaz* Unit from Kubinka was airlifted to Sevastopol on that day). The 27th, however, is the official date of Crimea “rejoining” the motherland, and to commemorate the role of Russian SOF, President Vladimir Putin named the day the official day of Russian Special Operations Forces (in line with the official day of other units, such as the day of the Airborne troops, 2 August, which commemorates the first Soviet airborne forces’ parachute jump in 1930).

The plans for the practically bloodless seizure of Crimea were based largely on those drawn up by the General Staff’s Main Operations Directorate, relying heavily on GRU intelligence. The GRU had completed its intelligence preparation of the battlefield, was constantly monitoring Ukrainian forces on the peninsula, and intercepting their communications. According to Professor Mark Galeotti, the GRU did not just provide intelligence and cover for the “little green men” who were able to quickly seize control of all strategic points on the peninsula – many of those very operatives were current or former GRU *spetsnaz*.⁶⁵ Others were members of the naval *spetsnaz*, primarily from the 431st Independent Special Purpose Naval Reconnaissance Point, based out of the Black Sea Fleet.⁶⁶

Importantly, in a matter of a few days, Russian forces were able to seize power, block, disarm and even win over significant portions of the Ukrainian military. Subsequently, they then legitimized their presence, all the while conducting information operations and working to integrate the region back into the Russian Federation.⁶⁷

In many ways their method was a covert unconventional warfare operation. After identifying sympathetic locals (mostly disenfranchised ethnic Russians), they put together a proxy force comprised of a variety of groups – local hooligans, want-to-be political leaders, and even Russians from Russia. Then, when the moment was right, (and this moment came quickly), “unidentified men in black uniforms” seized government buildings, including the Crimean parliament. An “emergency session” of the parliament was then held and Sergei Aksyonov was chosen as the new Prime Minister of Crimea.

Aksyonov claimed the men were part of Crimea’s self-defense forces and under his personal command (but they were most likely Russian special operators). These special operators – reportedly from squad 0900⁶⁸ – seized important buildings (including the Crimean Parliament). SOF operators, perhaps from other units, seized other strategic infrastructure, including the HQ of the Ukrainian Navy in Sevastapol, the HQ of the 204th Tactical Aviation Brigade in Belbek (they were joined by the 810th Marines Brigade in this operation), and the 1st Independent Marines Battalion in Feodosia. *Spetsnaz* personnel were also involved in several of these operations.⁶⁹

The rest is history – Crimea then voted to join the Russian Federation, and the Russian parliament voted to accept Crimea into the Russian Federation. Finally, Russian forces seized all military bases, infrastructure and equipment on the peninsula. Within a few short weeks, an entire territorial objective had been seized and politically integrated into the Russian Federation, almost with no shots fired, the acme of Sun Tzu’s prescription for warfare.

Eastern Ukraine and the “Novorossiia Campaign”

Juxtaposed to the quick and nearly bloodless seizure of Crimea, the battle for eastern Ukraine has become a protracted one,

claiming over 9,000 soldiers, and continues to this day. From February 2014 to the present, *spetsnaz* and SOF have participated in the fighting in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine against government security forces, and have probably operated outside of that area as well. Both *spetsnaz* units and Russian SOF are deployed in the region, along with conventional forces, though it is unclear exactly who is doing what. Given their mission-sets, it is highly likely that both *spetsnaz* and SOF are organizing local insurgent forces, engaging in train and equip missions, and serving as military trainers in general. Additionally, it would be naïve to think that they are not also engaged in direct action.

One group they have been working with is led by Igor Girkin, who is there under the alias Igor Strelkov (from the Russian word for “shooter”). Strelkov made no efforts to hide the fact that he was engaged in unconventional warfare, with the goal of triggering an armed uprising and separatist movement that would ultimately allow eastern Ukraine to join Russia.⁷⁰ This 45-year-old retired FSB colonel leads a 52-member strong group of fighters, many of whom had been active in Crimea before showing up in eastern Ukraine, first in Slavyansk. While not all had formidable fighting experience, the majority did, with several members even coming from the elite *spetsnaz* GRU.⁷¹

Immediately following the seizure of Crimea, separatist movements emerged in eastern Ukraine, particularly Donetsk and Luhansk, along with the proclamation in April 2014 of the People’s Republic of Donetsk and the People’s Republic of Luhansk. This change came immediately on the heels of the announcement of the “Novorossiia Project.” As Putin himself phrased it as part of his information operations campaign:

I would like to remind you that what was called Novorossiia (New Russia) back in the tsarist days – Kharkov, Lugansk,

Donetsk, Kherson, Nikolayev and Odessa – were not part of Ukraine back then. These territories were given to Ukraine in the 1920s by the Soviet government. Why? Who knows. They were won by Potyomkin and Catherine the Great in a series of well-known wars. The center of that territory was Novorossiysk, so the region is called Novorossiya. Russia lost these territories for various reasons, but the people remained.⁷²

This was more than a political statement or part of an information operation – it was the launching phase of a military campaign, one which I label the Novorossiya campaign. Like any campaign, it was well thought-out, contained phases, and even branches and sequels. The goal was to use unconventional warfare methods in the region to mobilize the ethnic Russian population, train, arm, and equip them, and the guide them in a “war of liberation” from Ukraine, all the while maintaining persistent (if not plausible) deniability of Russian government and military involvement. In the end it proved to be a failure, and apparently Moscow abandoned the “project”.

The first phase, and this phase very much predates the launching of any military action (and would equate to what we know of as shaping operations), was to infiltrate Ukrainian political and military structures, not just in the eastern Ukraine region, but in all of Ukraine – including in the government and the military. Along with this phase were inform and influence activities aimed at developing sympathy for the plight of ethnic Russians in Ukraine and dissuading those who would support war with Russia. This phase not only predated the initiation of military operations, it continued throughout them, and indeed continues today.

The second phase began with the initiation of military operations, starting with the seizure of Crimea, discussed above. At this point

spetsnaz and SOF presumably began to organize and enable proxy forces in target regions, with Russian forces operating covertly in Ukraine. This location is where more little green men were spotted along with those in sterile uniforms claiming to not be from the Russian Federation Armed Forces, despite sometimes very convincing photographic evidence identifying them as precisely that, (again, followed with persistent deniability). This phase was crucial for organizing those who would do the majority of the fighting and would put a local face on the conflict.

The second part of this phase began in June, when Russian conventional forces began to assemble along the Russian-Ukrainian border, including motorized-rifle brigades, artillery units, and armored brigades. This assembly was mostly a show of force but could have been a preparatory move for a possible invasion had things in eastern Ukraine gone differently. Another aspect of this phase was the beginning of internationally-organized negotiations in Minsk in order to arrive at a ceasefire agreement. Of course, this agreement would be nothing more than a delaying move on the part of Russia, allowing *spetsnaz* and SOF more time to organize, train, and equip the proxy forces. This agreement became compromised by the shooting down of a Malaysian airliner in July.

As the fighting continued, more and more conventional forces began appearing in the target regions of eastern Ukraine, even while Poroshenko and Putin were meeting in Minsk to negotiate a second ceasefire agreement. Then, in late May of 2015, the “Novorossiya Project” was closed, apparently with Moscow giving up on a quick victory in the east and settling for a frozen conflict that leaves the region neither fully under the control of the Ukrainian government nor a part of Russia.⁷³

Syria

Russia surprised the world in September 2015, as it, without warning, launched an intervention into the civil war in Syria. In a matter of weeks, Russia went from supplying some weapons, equipment, and naval infantry to an outright intervention on behalf of President Bashar al-Assad and his regime.⁷⁴ Both *spetsnaz* and SOF were involved in the operations, though according to Galeotti, Russia's elite units were kept from getting involved in major combat operations – that mission fell to conventional units.⁷⁵ That left special operators to deal with the other two core missions – battlefield reconnaissance (which in Syria especially involved guiding Russian artillery fires and air strikes)⁷⁶ and special security missions.

Of course, it would be naïve to think that *spetsnaz* and SOF were not involved prior to the intervention, providing Intelligence Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) and perhaps even some training of Assad regime forces.⁷⁷ The Russian news media recently highlighted the achievements of their “train and equip” mission in Syria. As they stated, “our military experts and advisors have achieved significant success in the training of the Syrian military.”⁷⁸

Additionally, they provided enhanced security for the Russian embassy and other facilities. The “Zaslon” (screen) force, for example, deployed some of its men in their usual role of Very Important Person (VIP) protection, hostage rescue, and reinforcing embassy security,⁷⁹ though they are also known to conduct security force assistance training. This *spetsnaz* Unit does not report to the GRU, but reports directly to the Foreign Intelligence Service.

As Russia began its intervention in Syria, Russian SOF and *spetsnaz* were involved in securing the Hmeimim airbase at Latakia and the Tartus naval facility on the Syrian coast. They were then subsequently involved in providing some limited reconnaissance to

assist in the targeting of airstrikes.⁸⁰ According to Galeotti, the majority of targeting sets came from the Syrians, (which may help explain the concentration not on the Islamic State and its forces but on other rebel groups posing a more immediate threat to the Assad regime).

At the peak of the deployment, there was a detachment of approximately 250 GRU *spetsnaz* soldiers, probably drawn from several units, including Naval *Spetsnaz* from the 431st Naval Reconnaissance Point.⁸¹ There was also a team of SOF operators from the KSSO, reportedly mainly snipers/counter-snipers and scouts.⁸²

Conducting force protection missions in an environment like Syria is as dangerous as operating in any conventional battlefield. Again according to Galeotti, *spetsnaz* may have already been in Damascus as a contingency in the event of a regime collapse. This conditions seems to be the case in terms of trainers, who were there to train local military on the equipment they were being provided. For Western forces operating in an environment like Syria, this is almost always a SOF mission, but it is unclear whether the Russian trainers were SOF, *spetsnaz*, or conventional forces.⁸³

One *spetsnaz* unit that was most likely there was Zaslou, which makes perfect sense since they are tasked not just with VIP protection and security, but also with “clean up” operations in events such as regime collapse. This is reportedly precisely what they did in Iraq immediately upon the fall of the Hussein regime, removing sensitive materials and documents Moscow did not want falling into US hands.

According to Galeotti, who reportedly had a conversation with a serving officer before the drawdown in Syria began, the officer pointed out that “this is the kind of war for which the *Spetsnaz* have been training for thirty years” – referring to the Soviet

experiences in Afghanistan, which very much set the tone for their operations in Syria. The officer concluded by adding, “if we wanted to fight the war [in Syria], we’d be using *spetsnaz*.”⁸⁴ Galeotti takes this statement to mean that there was no willingness on the part of the Kremlin to deploy SOF and *spetsnaz* in the kind of “tip of the spear” assault and interdiction missions for which they train. It is also taken to indicate that Moscow had no intention of being sucked into a ground battle in Syria. Instead, the numbers of SOF and *spetsnaz* have been kept relatively low and they apparently remain focused on their ISR, training, and security missions.

LOOKING TOWARD THE FUTURE

In February 2013, Gerasimov published an article in *Voyenno Promyshlennyy Kuryer* under the title “The Value of Science is in Foresight” (*Tsennost’ nauki v predvidenii*).⁸⁵ The article dealt with Russian military perspectives on the future of warfare and the nature of its implications for military science and included a call for the military-science community to engage in several areas of research. Apparently, Gerasimov intended the article to serve as a rallying call to the members of the Academy of Military Sciences to refocus their efforts on the challenges of future conflict at a practical and meaningful level.⁸⁶

In this much-debated article on future warfare, General Gerasimov mentioned special operations and special operations forces several times. Clearly he sees their role as a feature of future warfare. While there is great debate over the question of whether or not his article was solely aimed at understanding modern Western ways of war, or if it is also applicable to how Russia intends to fight,⁸⁷ the fact that Gerasimov was a proponent of the process of standing up Russia’s KSSO and developing Russian SOF suggests that he envisions a role for both in the future operating environment. This idea is supported by the fact that SOF have fought alongside

spetsnaz and conventional forces in Crimea, eastern Ukraine, and even Syria, carving out, perhaps, a distinct niche for themselves as a Tier 1 SOF element that can handle any mission, anywhere, anytime.

It is interesting to note that this article appeared only weeks before the much-delayed announcement of the standing-up of Russia's KSSO and SOF. In the weeks immediately following its publication, the fact that special operations figured prominently in the article suggested that the article was indeed an analysis of Western ways of war. But the following month, once the announcement of Russia's years of work on developing a special operations command and SOF forces was announced, it perhaps lent credence to those who read into the article that it is more than an analysis of a Western way of war, but perhaps is also laying the foundation for how Russia will engage in warfare. Coupled with the uncanny resemblance between much of what is in the article and Russia's subsequent military operations in Crimea, eastern Ukraine, and Syria, perhaps there is something to be said for the latter argument that it is as much prescriptive of Russian future warfare as it is descriptive of Western warfare.

As mentioned at the outset of this monograph, the great military strategist Colin Gray has said that the 21st century is likely to be a golden era for SOF for many countries of the world. I think it is safe to say that Russia will be one of those countries and that we are likely to see continued significant development of KSSO and Russian SOF. It is probably foolish to predict that SOF will fully replace *spetsnaz*, especially given the fact that *spetsnaz* units exist at so many levels, from the ministry of defense to local law enforcement. But more and more serious *spetsnaz* units may get drawn into the orbit of Russian SOF, much like psychological operations and civil affairs did in the US (and the very delayed standing up of the United States Marine Corps Forces Special Operations

Command (MARSOC)⁸⁸). This change would certainly increase the prestige, power (as an organ of the state), and capabilities of both the KSSO and SOF. All indications to this author seem to suggest this course of action is highly probable. Whatever the outcome of this change, one thing seems for sure: in the words of Galeotti, Russia's *spetsnaz* and SOF "are at the heart of a new Russian way of war," one "that emphasizes speed, surprise, and deception." While Galeotti continues to suggest that this emphasis has replaced an emphasis on massive conventional force, here I disagree, for I would not discount the joint use of the former along with the integrated use of the latter.⁸⁹

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5 Vladimir Kvachkov, *Spetsnaz Rossii* (Moscow: Voennaya Literatura, 2004).

6 *Ibid.*

7 The GRU is thought to be the largest directorate of the general staff, and is almost an organization unto itself. It performs many of the same functions as the US Defense Intelligence Agency, including managing Russia's military attaché program, operating covert agents abroad, and performing analysis. See Grau and Bartles, 232.

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33 Aleksandr Kolpakidi and Vladimir Sever, *Spetsnaz GRU* (Moscow: Yauza and Eksmo, 2008).

34 Grau and Bartles, 232.

35 Aleksey Nikolsky, “Russian ‘Spetsnaz’ Forces – From Saboteurs to Court Bailiffs,” *Moscow Defense Brief*, Vol. 40, no. 2 (2014), <http://mdb.cast.ru/mdb/1-2014/item4/article2/>, (accessed 6 August 2016).

36 Trenin, 2013.

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38 Colin Gray, *Another Bloody Century: Future Warfare* (London: Phoenix, 2005), 251.

39 The *Posse Comitatus Act* in the United States forbids the use of its military for domestic law enforcement purposes.

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41 The tragedy at Beslan began on 1 September 2004, when Muslim separatists from Russia’s North Caucasus seized a grammar school and held everyone hostage. The siege only ended three days later when various military units attacked the school, purportedly set off by an over-zealous sniper who shot one of the terrorists before the planned assault on the building, leading to utter chaos and the death of 330 hostages. See, for example, Timothy Phillips, *Beslan: The Tragedy of School No. 1* (London: Granta, 2014).

42 The Moscow theatre hostage crisis (also known as the Nord-Ost siege) was the seizure of a crowded Dubrovka Theater by 40 to 50 armed

Chechens on 23 October 2002 that involved 850 hostages and ended with the death of at least 170 people, partly due to the ineptness of the spetsnaz involved, who, for example, pumped an undisclosed chemical agent into the building's ventilation system at the start of the assault. Almost all of the 130 hostages who died did so related to the inability of first responders to treat the victims because they had no idea what agent had been used. See, for example, Viktor Stepankov, *Bitva za "Nord-Ost"* (Moscow: Yaza, 2003).

43 Turbiville, 1-2. Though writing much later and probably unaware of Turbiville's argument, Nikolsky also pointed to the failures at Beslan and Nord Ost' as precipitating reflection on the need for something like a special operations command. See Nikolsky, (2015), 131.

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- 57 Nikolsky, (2017).
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