

The Advent of the Russian Special Operations Command

A Monograph

by

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Abstract

The Advent of the Russian Special Operations Command, by Major Bret Woellner, US Army, 45 pages.

For what purpose did Russia establish its Special Operations Command? This monograph explores why the Russians established a Special Operations Command (KSO) with its own Special Operations Forces (SSO) distinct from other special operations elements such as Spetsnaz. After the Georgian War in 2008, the Russian perception of threats within the context of their domestic politics, economic limitations and demography led them to enact a campaign of military reform. Conventional forces became more capable by focusing on operational mobility, combined arms enablers, and reconnaissance. Concurrently, Russian SSO improved on Russia's historical experience with special operations by creating a force accountable to its national command authority and capable of operating independently, covertly or in support of conventional operations, as in Ukraine in 2014. Though improving Russia's indirect approach beyond its borders appears to be central to the creation of the KSO, other aspects also matter: emulation of the West, the need for an economy of force, a complement to conventional operations, and internal domestic competition among security services.

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Acronyms

AT	Anti-Tank
CBRN	Chemical, Biological, Radiological, Nuclear
C2	Command and Control
CT	Counter Terrorist
DA	Direct Action
EU	European Union
EW	Electronic Warfare
FSB	<i>Federalnaya Sluzhba Bezopasnosti Rossiyskoy Federatsii</i> , Federal Security Service
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GRU	<i>Glavnoye Razvedyvatel'noye Upravleniye</i> , Main Intelligence Directorate, Russian General Staff
KGB	<i>Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti</i> , Committee for State Security
KSO	<i>Komandovanie Sil Spetsialnykh Operatsiy</i> , Special Operations Command
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NRS	Naval Reconnaissance Station
SAM	Surface to Air Missile
SOF	Special Operations Forces
Spetsnaz	<i>Voyska Spetsialnovo Naznacheniya</i> , Special Purpose Troops
SSO	<i>Sil Spetsialnykh Operatsiy</i> , Special Operations Forces
SR	Special Reconnaissance
SVR	<i>Sluzhba Vneshney Razvedki</i> , Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service
UAV	Unmanned Aerial Vehicle
UW	Unconventional Warfare
VDV	<i>Vozdushno-Desantnye Voyska</i> , Airborne Troops

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Introduction

Since the early 21st century, Western powers have become increasingly concerned about an aggressive and revanchist Russia. The Russian approach to warfare in the post-Soviet era has embraced an irregular form, particularly as Russian attempts to resist the American-led international order have grown. Recent overt and covert Russian interventions have reinforced notions of a dangerous and belligerent Russian foe. Perceptions of the modern Russian threat have centered on increased Russian capability resulting from their military reform. The preponderance of reform has been designed to shape the conventional military to be more effective at addressing Russia's security environment. Even so, Russia has cultivated a renewed appreciation for irregular forms of warfare. For that reason, Russia created its Special Operations Command during the course of military reforms beginning in 2008. This monograph explores the advent of the Russian Special Operations Command to inform Western efforts to counter Russian irregular expeditionary operations.

For what purpose did Russia establish its Special Operations Command? This is a fundamental question to understand the Russian approach to special operations. Moreover, answers to this question inform the ability to predict how and why Russia might employ its special operations capability. It may also offer suggestions on how to counter Russian irregular expeditionary efforts.

The likely answer to this question is that Russia created its Special Operations Command to build a high-end SOF-centric expeditionary capability beyond its borders, capable of direct action and unconventional warfare. The mobility, flexibility and covert capability of an independently operating Special Operations Force (SOF) enables Russia to increase its efforts to access and influence governments and people in its near abroad and beyond. Elite SOF also enables Russian efforts to destabilize less friendly governments and to undermine the American-led order in select places across the globe.

To examine this subject, over the following four sections, this monograph addresses Russian military reform, the advent of Russian SOF within the context of that reform, and the deduced Russian approach to special operations. Russia's modern theory of special operations and its conception of SOF employment requires an understanding of the larger context of Russian military reforms, as well as the recent employment of the Russian military, and the capability gaps identified therefrom. Famously, irregular warfare featured prominently in Russia's intervention in Ukraine in 2014. While their actions in Ukraine remain an important example of Russian irregular warfare, the reform of Russian special operations capability developed in a larger security context. Fortunately for the study of this subject, Russia waged a military campaign on either side of its reform efforts – Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014. In light of the broader Russian security context and conventional military reforms, the reform of its special operations capability suggests that Russia has identified a need for an elite unit designed for both direct action and unconventional warfare. Consequently, they designed a force tailored to provide such options for Russian leadership.

The first section of this monograph considers how Russian leadership viewed the need for military reform writ large. This section explores the Russian perception of threats and how Russian leadership evaluated its security environment within the context of its domestic politics. Consequent military reform addressed newfound threats and challenges particularly after the Russian War in Georgia in 2008. Even so, demographic limitations, economic trends and institutional resistance have constrained reform efforts. The second section will outline the substance of those conventional military reforms.

The third section explores the advent of the Russian Special Operations Command. This effort started from a historically understood use of the role for specialized military forces, evolved during the reform efforts targeting Spetsnaz elements, and accounted for non-military special operations elements. Further, the establishment of a Russian Special Operations Command straddles the campaigns in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014. The use of SOF, or

lack thereof, in these campaigns helps explain whether and how the Russian approach to special operations changed over the course of the last thirty years.

The fourth section analyzes the Russian use of special operations to determine how Russia conceives of its Special Operations Forces. The establishment of the Russian Special Operations Command may be a pivotal event that explains the modern Russian approach to special operations. This section provides insight into how Russia might be expected to employ its SOF. More importantly, it offers implications on how the United States may counter Russia's special operations efforts.

Two primary considerations limit the scope of this monograph. First, internal Russian security deliberations are not always publicly available, particularly with regard to special operations. Much of the Russian deliberation occurred without public scrutiny and Russia only acknowledged in retrospect many of the military reforms that had been undertaken.¹ As a result, many of the conclusions herein must be inferred from publicly available open-source documents.

Second, this study focuses on the Russian Special Operations Command and its constituent SOF. It will thus exclude some of the broader irregular forms of belligerent activity that Russia has undertaken across the globe, much of which may be considered special operations writ large. These belligerent behaviors include the Russian use of paramilitary private security contractors, foreign cyber campaigns, assassination efforts and international espionage. Though such subjects must inform efforts to counter Russian aggression, they fall outside the scope of this work.

Two terms in this monograph deserve particular scrutiny before more detailed usage. The first, *Spetsnaz*, comes from the Russian abbreviation for *Voyska spetsialnovo naznacheniya*, literally Troops of a Special Purpose. *Spetsnaz* serves as an umbrella term that includes elite

¹ Christopher Marsh, *Developments in Russian Special Operations: Russia's Spetsnaz, SOF and Special Operations Forces Command* (Ottawa, Ontario: Canadian Special Operations Forces Command, 2016), 1-4.

soldiers across the security services. Their mandates and organization range from elite police elements, to elite light infantry, to clandestine elements working with indigenous forces. By contrast, Special Operations Forces (SOF), in the Russian equivalent is *Sil Spetsialnykh Operatsiy*, a literal translation. Abbreviated as SSO, these refer only to the soldiers assigned to the *Komandovanie Sil Spetsialnykh Operatsiy*, Special Operations Command or KSO (sometimes KSSO). They owe their origins to the military reforms from 2008-2013. Throughout this monograph, the term “SOF” will be used to refer to Special Operations Forces in the abstract, while “SSO” will be used to refer specifically to the Russian SOF organization. Additional terms relevant to this monograph’s discussion of Special Operations may be found in Appendix 1.

Section I: Impetus for Reform

Russia today looks much as it has throughout its history: illiberal, revanchist, autocratic, belonging neither to the West nor East, with an economy notable for its centralized management and inequality.² The Russian economic collapse and instability of the 1990s gave way to domestic consolidation in the early 2000s which enabled an assertive Russian foreign policy of the 2010s.³ However, a unified Russian foreign policy, much like domestic policy, suffers from competition between different power centers and the clans that comprise them. As a result, Russian policy often appears incoherent, inconsistent, and unpredictable, marked at once by competition and cooperation across a fluid and sliding scale.⁴ Nevertheless, contemporary Russia has four basic foreign policy goals: competition with the United States; increasing its influence in Europe and

² Walter Laqueur, *Putinism: Russia and its Future with the West* (New York, NY: Thomas Dunne Books, 2015), 88-98, 118-121.

³ Laqueur, 185-207.

⁴ Nikolas K. Gvosdev and Christopher Marsh, eds, *Russian Foreign Policy: Interests, Vectors and Sectors* (Thousand Oaks CA: CQ Press, 2014), 49-54.

Asia; investing in its presence in lower-priority regions such as the Middle East; and maintaining dominance of its Near Abroad by influencing the domestic affairs of former Soviet countries.⁵

The Russian security forces represent a powerful tool in service to those ends, but required reform to become effective. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the Russian military suffered from a two-decade long malaise of disrepair and ineffectiveness. In the early years of the twenty first century, Russia began to take more seriously the need for military reform, a process whose most recent iteration began with a series of modernization efforts beginning in 2008. A revitalized Russian military stunned observers with successful military operations in Ukraine and Syria. This revitalization occurred for two systemic reasons, catalyzed by a proximate cause: Russian perceptions of the international security environment, domestic priorities, and the Georgian War of 2008.⁶

The most important driver for Russia's military reform was its perception of its strategic situation. The 2008 military reform efforts resulted from the interaction of specific factors of the early twenty first century combined with perennial elements of Russian foreign policy. Russian military reform sought to arrest the decline associated with the latter years of the Soviet Union and particularly the calamitous 1990s that jeopardized Russia's self-perception of great power status. Moreover, the Russian government has long felt a geographic sense of vulnerability, owing to its vast expanse and lengthy borders. Particularly after NATO's campaign in Serbia in 1999, Russia appreciated the need for a strong enough military to enhance its international influence. As President Putin declared, "Russia cannot fall back on diplomatic and economic methods alone to settle contradiction and resolve conflict.... Developing military potential as part of a deterrence strategy ... is an indispensable condition for Russia to feel secure"⁷

⁵ Robert Nalbandov, *Not By Bread Alone: Russian Foreign Policy Under Putin* (Lincoln, NE: 2016), 191-198, 458-460.

⁶ Bettina Renz, *Russia's Military Revival* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2018), 2-18.

⁷ Vladimir Putin, "Being Strong: Why Russia Needs to Rebuild Its Military," *Foreign Affairs*, February 21, 2012, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/02/21/being-strong/>.

Further, Russia has traditionally secured its legacy as an imperial power by having the regionally dominant military and maintaining a secure buffer zone of subordinate states along its perimeter. This calculus was altered by the implosion of the Soviet Union and by the accompanying independence of states once controlled from Moscow. The pro-democracy color revolutions reinforced the Russian notion of American meddling along the Russian periphery. Lastly, Moscow has historically preferred international multipolarity based on ad hoc relationships, coexisting competition and cooperation and an order not dominated by a single state. In sum, these historical preferences of the Russian government created a sense in the early 2000s of the need for redress by investment in its hard power apparatus; namely, military reform.⁸

Russia's approach to military reform was also driven by concerns over domestic stability and internal politics. Many of President Yeltsin's reforms from the 1990s were designed to fragment power centers during a delicate time of power transition from the Soviet Union to national governments. Consequently, the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the KGB were broken into smaller government agencies.⁹ The Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces was made subordinate to the President, rather than the Minister of Defense. This was a preventative measure to avoid an alternate source of power to the presidency, but was ineffective for the execution of reforms.¹⁰ However, President Putin's ascension to power in 2000 stanching the intentional neglect of the Armed Forces, revitalized military modernization for readiness and began a process of reconsolidation of the federal bureaucracy under presidential control.¹¹ Strong organs of internal security could thus inoculate the Russian regime from the kinds of civil discord drummed up by the West, as 'democracy promotion' efforts were perceived to have done across

⁸ Renz, 19-49; Nalbandov, 1-17, 160-166.

⁹ Renz, 52-54, 61, 88-90, 97-100, 116. KGB is the *Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti*, translated as the Committee for State Security.

¹⁰ Dale Herspring, "Military Reform" in *Putin's Russia: Past Imperfect, Future Uncertain*, 6th edition, edited by Stephen K. Wegren (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 324-325.

¹¹ Renz, 52-54, 61, 88-90, 97-100, 116.

Eastern Europe, the Baltics and Caucasus.¹² Putin consistently pursued unified and centralized government as an antidote for the kind of domestic instability and fragmentation that had made Russia vulnerable and unable to pursue its interests in the 1990s.¹³

The third major impetus for reform, the proximate cause, was Russia's war with Georgia in 2008. The War in Georgia proved the ineptitude of the Russian Armed Forces and convinced even the conservative military leadership of the need for reform.¹⁴ After a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) summit in April 2008, in which NATO offered Georgia a vague overture of future admission, tensions in Georgia rose as did small-scale Russian aerial incursions and minor exchanges of fire.¹⁵ Escalations increased as the Georgians misinterpreted the nature and degree of American support to their attempts to assert control back over the breakaway republics in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. War broke out after Georgia attempted to seize the South Ossetian capital and came into direct conflict with Russian peacekeepers. Russia reinforced both breakaway republics and invaded Georgia proper. The war concluded in a mere seven days after a EU-brokered ceasefire. In the words of then-President Medvedev: "the August [2008] crisis merely accelerated the moment of truth." Indeed, the reform program would begin within days of the conclusion of the war in Georgia. Immediately following the conflict, then-Prime Minister Putin announced a reinvigorated program of reform, including rearmament, force generation, and a doctrinal overhaul favoring readiness and mobility. Nevertheless, the reforms proceeded haltingly as a result of conservative elements reluctant to change.¹⁶

¹² Fiona Hill and Clifford G. Gaddy, *Mr. Putin* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2015), 260-261, 342-345.

¹³ Hill and Gaddy, 57-62.

¹⁴ Herspring, 329-330.

¹⁵ Gvosdev, 172-176.

¹⁶ Sutyagin, Igor and Justin Bronk, *Russia's New Ground Forces: Capabilities, Limitations and Implications for International Security* (Abingdon, UK: Royal United Services Institute for Defense and Security Studies, 2017), 2-4.

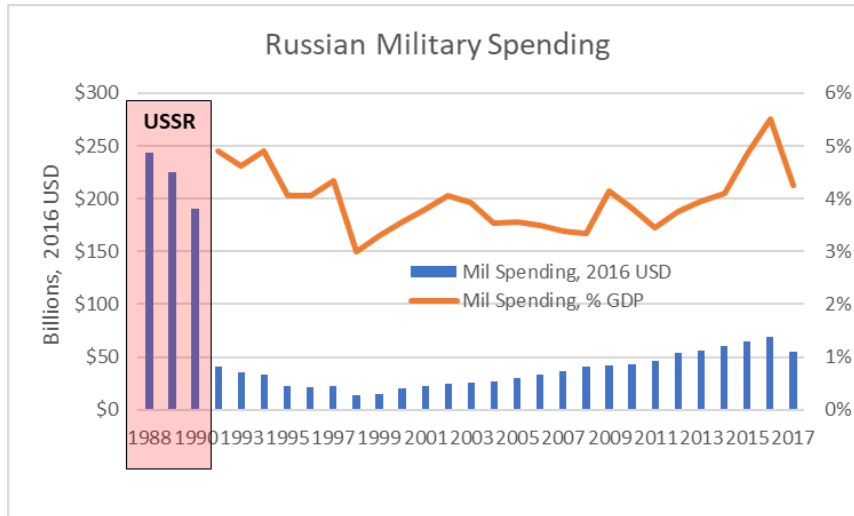


Figure 1. Russian Military Spending. Created by author using data from Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, “SIPRI Military Expenditure Database 2018,” 2018, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>.

In addition to the reluctance of conservative institutional elements, two serious constraints to Russian military reform deserve attention: economic sluggishness and demographic stagnation. Indeed, Russia acknowledged the need for military professionalization and a capable rapid reaction force in the 1990s. Conventional parity with Western military powers never disappeared as an aspiration, but remained unattainable in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War. However, along with bureaucratic infighting, Russia’s cratering economy simply could not provide the means for resources to be seriously devoted to military investment.¹⁷ Military readiness, maintenance, procurement, professionalism and training all suffered until the economy recovered in the early Putin era.¹⁸ Buoyed by high oil and gas prices, Russian military spending quadrupled in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, even as military spending as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) remained nearly constant (See Figure 1). After the war with Georgia in 2008, Russia’s military spending has increased 50% as a proportion of GDP,

¹⁷ Renz, 54-60.

¹⁸ Renz, 54-60.

accounting for nearly 6% of GDP in 2016.¹⁹ Conversely, an economic contraction due to falling oil prices beginning in 2014, strained the resources available for military reform.²⁰ Much as dipping oil prices have slowed Russian modernization, sanctions imposed in the wake of the annexation of Crimea have dampened Russia's ability to modernize. Many strategic sectors in Russia are particularly susceptible to sanctions given that a significant amount of critical technologies, such as electronic components and optics, are imported.²¹ Lastly, empire is expensive. Russia's empire (funds spent to subsidize partners in its territorial acquisitions, frozen conflicts, or friendly governments in the near abroad) costs approximately \$30 billion per year, which combined with military spending accounts for nearly 20% of Russia's state budget.²² Russian military reform will thus be subject to Russia's ability to afford it, hampered as it will be by energy prices, sanctions and sunk-cost foreign commitments.

Russian demography also limits Russian military power. By some estimates, and discounting immigration, Russia's population is contracting by 20% each generation.²³ Russia's desire to maintain a large force, though it is less than a quarter of the size of the Soviet military, has long created a schism within senior government ranks. Some conservative generals have resisted calls for a smaller, more modular, more ready force in favor of a large conscript army that enables a strategic reserve for contingencies such as a confrontation with the NATO alliance. However, the fact remains, that based on the size of Russia's annual conscript pool, Russia cannot maintain the size it prefers. Despite President Putin's decree in 2016 that the military must

¹⁹ Sutyagin and Bronk, 130.

²⁰ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, "SIPRI Military Expenditure Database 2018", 2018, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>; Renz, 62, 72-76.

²¹ Sutyagin and Bronk, 82-86; F. Stephen Larrabee, Peter Wilson, and John Gordon, eds, *The Ukrainian Crisis and European Security: Implications for the United States and U.S. Army* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2015), 3-5.

²² Laqueur, 224-225; SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, 2018.

²³ Laqueur, 136-137, 211-213.

See also Timothy Heleniak, "Population Trends" in *Putin's Russia: Past Imperfect, Future Uncertain*, 6th edition, edited by Stephen K. Wegren (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 153-176.

maintain one million members of its armed forces, Russia is estimated to fall well short, maintaining a standing force of approximately 800,000 men. Thus, a smaller, professional force, favored by reformers since the 1990s, is a demographic necessity.²⁴

In the aftermath of the Cold War, Russian reformists struggled to overcome the strategic concerns of security services wary of change. Conservative elements remained dedicated to a large military primarily built to confront a NATO threat. The military was not ready to manage smaller engagements short of general war. The military felt dragged by inept internal security services into a series of small engagements in the former Soviet space and Russia itself. The dissipating threat from major militaries in the West and East seemed replaced by small-scale insurrections and ethnic instability along the southern perimeter. Not until the Putin regime and the Russian economic recovery did the Russian federation orient towards both threats: an expanding activist NATO and small-scale conflicts.²⁵

Section II: Conventional Military Reform

The evident need for reform compelled change despite economic, demographic and institutional resistance to military reform. First, the logic of military reform nested with foreign policy aims and a long-standing effort to reinvent the military conscription system. Second, the reform program charted a course for a smaller, more professional force. Lastly, the modern Russian military reflects these reformist efforts. By understanding the substance of these reforms and the modern Russian conventional capability, one can then understand where special operations fits into the Russian conception of conflict.

²⁴ Vladimir Putin, Presidential Decree 329, “*Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii o shtatnoi chislennosti Vooruzhennykh Sil Rossiiskoi Federatsii*,” July 8, 2016, accessed December 11, 2018, <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/document/view/0001201607080015>; Renz, 67, 70-71; Anton Lavrov, “Towards a Professional Army,” Center for Analysis of Strategy and Technology, 2015, accessed December 11, 2018, <http://cast.ru/products/articles/towards-a-professional-army.html>.

²⁵ Dmitri Trenin and Aleksei Malashenko, eds. *Russia’s Restless Frontier: The Chechnya Factor in Post-Soviet Russia* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution Press, 2004), 103-164.

First, military reform reflected assertive 21st century Russian foreign policy and tapped into a long-standing disillusion with mass conscription and inefficient military spending. Russian leaders have sought a reduction in the size of the military since the late Soviet period. In the 1980s, this was an argument for a reduction in military spending. After the Soviet Union fell, this argument became more compelling and combined with a desire to reduce the expense that the system of mass mobilization of strategic reserves required. Such a system depended on the maintenance of excess personnel, materiel and infrastructure to absorb a rapid incorporation of millions of soldiers.²⁶ The immediate post-war decade was marked by economic retraction, political instability, and an embarrassing military performance in Chechnya. Military reform nominally began under Yeltsin with an attempt to reduce conscription by introducing volunteer soldiers in 1996.²⁷

Indeed, the debate over manning the military – conscription or contracts – has long been at the center of military reform. Conscription appeals to those who see the massive formations of NATO as the foremost military problem – sizeable strategic reserves for a mobilization into general war.²⁸ Additionally, senior military leaders argued that the military played a useful role in socializing young men for national unity and that contraction would cost thousands of senior officers their jobs. By contrast, contracted soldiers appealed to proponents for professionalization – longer service terms, better training, more skilled with the complicated instruments of modern warfare.²⁹ A smaller, more professional force could be deployed more quickly than the composite forces that struggled in Chechnya.³⁰ Attempting to find a compromise, Putin embraced

²⁶ Rod Thornton, *Military Modernization and the Russian Ground Forces* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2011), 3-4.

²⁷ Thornton, 7-9.

²⁸ Anton Lavrov, “Towards a Professional Army;” Renz, 70-71.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Thornton, 3-4.

moderated reform – a small, professional military that could be augmented by conscripts.³¹

Employing more contract soldiers enabled Russia to man highly ready units of primarily professional soldiers as well as achieve size by retaining conscription.³²

Second, the reforms embraced the idea of a smaller, more mobile force that addresses Russia's modern interpretation of warfare and great power competition. In 2007, Putin's newly installed Minister of Defense, Anatoliy Serdyukov, the former head of the tax ministry, attempted to reduce the top-heaviness of the force by converting a mass-conscription army to a more professional and more mobile force. With this appointment, President Putin signaled his intention to root out the extensive corruption that accounted for the misappropriation (or theft) of nearly 40% of the military budget.³³

The mediocre performance of Russian forces in the war in Georgia in 2008 aided Putin and Serdyukov's efforts to reform. Indeed, the modernization program reflects many of the lessons learned in the 2008 war with Georgia. Though the Russians achieved military victory in five days, they nonetheless identified weaknesses in command and control, modern technology, and rapid reaction capability. In the wake of the war with Georgia, reformers reorganized command structures. Emulating many Western militaries, brigades rather than divisions became the basic building block of combat formations. By design, these brigades would be more modular, independent, mobile and flexible. The inability of adjacent ground units to join the battle more quickly than airborne units stationed hundreds of kilometers away proved to policymakers the need for readiness, a thinly veiled criticism of the slow-to-mobilize conscription system.³⁴

After the Georgian War, Serdyukov's "New Look" policy innovated in several ways. Reforms sought to create a professional ever-ready Russian military capable of a full range of

³¹ Thornton, 4-6.

³² Anton Lavrov, "Towards a Professional Army;" Renz, 70-71.

³³ Hill and Gaddy, 334-338; Herspring, 327, 330-337.

³⁴ Renz, 62-65 78-82.

military operations, from small-scale engagements to large-scale combat. He focused on right-sizing the manning: reducing the overall end-strength, increasing pay, cutting the number of mid-grade officers, and creating a professional noncommissioned officer corps.³⁵ Brigades rather than divisions would be the core building-block of the new more mobile Army.³⁶ Massive procurement efforts would modernize equipment over a decade.³⁷ Lastly, Defense Minister Serdyukov ushered in a streamlined command and control (C2) architecture, moving to three-layers of command per geographical Military District, rather than four. Beginning in 2010, operational command of Russia's military forces originates at the geographically-oriented Operational Strategic Command, of which there are four. Ground forces in these commands are subordinated to Armies, with the notable exception of Spetsnaz. Moreover, these commands are inherently joint, controlling the ground, naval, and air assets within the district.³⁸ In 2014, Russia added a Northern Command with responsibility for sea and air space, primarily focused on the Arctic region.³⁹ (See Figure 2)

³⁵ Hill and Gaddy, 334-338; Herspring, 327, 330-337; Roger McDermott, *The Reform of Russia's Conventional Armed Forces* (Washington, DC: The Jamestown Foundation, 2011), 14-78. First, Serdyukov shrank the size of the military from two million to one million and reduced the size of the officer corps. He confronted the more conservative elements within the military, pointing out the absurdity of maintaining 203 divisions that numbered fewer than 100,000 combat-ready troops. He presided over the reduction of the term of conscription from two years to one year. He began outsourcing logistic requirements to private contractors to facilitate increased focused on training for military members. He defeated objections from the Finance Ministry and significantly increased military pay. Moreover, the Minister of Defense resumed oversight of the military via the subordination of the Chief of the General Staff back to the Ministry.

³⁶ Mark Galeotti, *The Modern Russian Army 1992-2016* (New York, NY: Osprey, 2017), 27-28. Before reform, the Russians maintained 6 out of 24 divisions in a ready status – fully manned and operationally ready. The reorientation towards a brigade-based army created 40 combat arms brigades (only 15 of which were fully manned) and 45 support brigades.

³⁷ Mark Galeotti, *The Modern Russian Army 1992-2016* (New York, NY: Osprey, 2017), 25-27.

³⁸ Herspring, 330-337.

³⁹ Galeotti, *The Modern Russian Army 1992-2016*, 29-34.



Figure 2: Russian Military Districts. Four Military Districts consolidated in 2010 and one Military Command (Northern Fleet), added in 2014. Note that the Russian Ministry of Defense currently includes Crimea as part of the Southern Military District.

Defense Intelligence Agency, *Russia Military Power: Building a Military to Support Great Power Aspirations* (Washington, DC: Defense Intelligence Agency, 2017), 14; Russian Ministry of Defense, “Military Districts,” accessed 18 March 2019, <https://structure.mil.ru/structure/okruga/west/news.htm>.

Nonetheless, Serdyukov’s term failed to achieve much needed reforms. His reform program often seemed ad hoc, contradictory, and lacking a unifying principle. The reforms met with institutional resistance from the military, especially as thousands of officer billets were eliminated. The military remained undermanned as hazing, abysmal housing, and low pay undermined the prestige of military service causing young men to dodge the draft. The military could not conscript the 300,000 young men it needed to maintain a force level of one million, falling short by as much as 50% of required conscripts. Equipment tended to be outdated or in disrepair; only around 15% of weapons could be considered modern. Professionalization, the process of contracting soldiers, was viewed as a failure by 2010. Chairman of the General Staff

Makarov declared that conscription would remain central to manning for the foreseeable future. Except for fully professional special forces, units would be mixed manned.⁴⁰

To continue the reform program, in November 2012, President Putin appointed General Sergei Shoigu as the Minister of Defense and General Valery Gerasimov as the Chief of Staff. General Shoigu oversaw a ban on purchasing foreign equipment to encourage investment in the indigenous defense industry. Pensions and pay continued to increase, tripling the average national salary by 2013.⁴¹ In 2014, the more mobile Russian Army would be able to mobilize 40,000 soldiers to the Ukrainian border in one week, triple the speed of its mobilization in the second Chechen War in 1999.⁴² After the annexation of Crimea and increasing tensions with NATO, Russia reversed course and reconstituted four division headquarters in 2016.⁴³ Even as divisions were reestablished in 2015, these comprise approximately 6,000 soldiers, nearly half of the previous model. These smaller divisions were designed to integrate combat arms more effectively than the battalion tactical groups that were carved out of brigades during the intervention in Ukraine.⁴⁴

Along with these changes, Russia declared its interpretation of the modern character of warfare. General Gerasimov identified a form of international struggle waged below the threshold of conventional military operations, a form of warfare the Russians have often accused the Americans of waging. In response to this changing environment, Russia would likewise adapt to “nonmilitary measures ... covert military measures ... information struggles and the actions of special operations forces.”⁴⁵ The Western sense of threat from Russia reflects both this

⁴⁰ Hill and Gaddy, 334-338; Herspring, 327, 330-337.

⁴¹ Herspring, 330-337.

⁴² Galeotti, *The Modern Russian Army 1992-2016*, 25-27.

⁴³ Herspring, 330-337.

⁴⁴ Galeotti, *The Modern Russian Army 1992-2016*, 27-28.

⁴⁵ Hill and Gaddy, 334-338.

contemporary Russian theory of warfare and the improved capability of conventional Russian forces.

The Modern Russian Military

As a result of reform, Russia's Army transformed from a force designed for territorial defense to a force capable of expeditionary offensive operations against peer Western adversaries. Russian forces are optimized for short-duration, high intensity, small-scale operations. The Russian military has become more capable of expeditionary operations as a result of reforms that emphasize three ideas: first, operational mobility; second, the incorporation of enablers for combined arms maneuver; third, the need for improved reconnaissance on the battlefield.⁴⁶

Russia has placed a primacy on operational mobility through the use of ready forces and pre-positioned equipment stocks. In so doing, the modern Russian military has significantly improved its rapid reaction capability over the past ten years. Russia's development of a battalion tactical group reinforces this rapid readiness. Each brigade provides a battalion – approximately 47,000 soldiers across the Russian ground troops – that is equipped and manned such that it may be employed within 24 hours. Airborne forces maintain another 5,000 such high-alert soldiers. Additionally, the Russian military will increase the size and lethality of Airborne forces after their proven mobility and effectiveness in Ukraine. Moreover, military lift can transport up to five motorized brigades (approximately 25,000 soldiers) in one lift. Additionally, the Russian military maintains pre-positioned stocks of heavy weapons and vehicles for a brigade-sized element at twenty one locations across its territory. Though the pre-positioned sites may contain legacy stock, they nevertheless provide Russia the ability to reinforce a particular military district or to absorb a wider mobilization of its populace. This logistics footprint enables the Russians to move

⁴⁶ Sutyagin, 10-11.

and equip reinforcements in twenty four hours (by doctrine) to seventy two hours (in practice during exercises).⁴⁷

The modern Russian military's inclusion of enablers into combined arms maneuver formations is an explicit acknowledgement of the evolved character of modern warfare. It has experimented with combined arms formations at the lowest echelon. Thus, the Russian Ground Forces have incorporated Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV), Engineer, Electronic Warfare, and Chemical-Biological-Radiological-Nuclear (CBRN) elements to improve mobility and survivability.⁴⁸ Each Russian military district will receive an aviation brigade and Russian field armies will receive an aviation regiment, providing greater tactical mobility for land forces. The Russian military will establish territorial defense units to account for the necessity of securing rear areas, a difficult lesson learned from the irregular warfare in Ukraine and Syria. These reforms combine to require fewer soldiers and simpler logistics support than the legacy force composition.⁴⁹

Third, Russia's land forces have come to appreciate the expanded need for reconnaissance on the modern battlefield. Field armies maintain reconnaissance brigades and at the combined arms brigade level, reconnaissance companies are becoming battalions with organic Spetsnaz capability. This provides brigade and division commanders an organic Spetsnaz

⁴⁷ Sutyagin, 16-24, 50-53; Airborne forces are being expanded from 36,000 to 60,000 soldiers and receiving tanks for increased firepower.

⁴⁸ Sutyagin 43-50, 62-66, 69-80. Maneuver brigades maintain an organic Electronic Warfare company that provides the capability to jam tactical enemy C2 networks as well as enemy Global Positioning System (GPS) signals for Precision Guided Munitions. Russian brigades now possess a UAV company to improve reconnaissance and EW capability. Combat engineers have improved Russian tactical mobility by increasing the bridging capability and mine clearance. Engineers also maintain extensive inflatable mock-ups to deceive an enemy force and improve maneuver formations' survivability. Lastly, each Military District received a Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear Defense (CBRN) unit. In 2014, each of the eleven field armies received a well-equipped CBRN regiment for tasks ranging from reconnaissance, decontamination and enabling maneuver through smokescreens. Ostensibly a defensive precaution, the expansion of this capability suggests a reevaluation at very senior levels of the probability of the use of such weapons in a combat scenario. Alternatively, it may be a capability to enable more effective brinkmanship and high-stakes diplomacy with Western powers. The adoption of a standard Armata family of armored vehicles enables experimentation and adaptation.

⁴⁹ Sutyagin, 43-50, 62-66, 69-80.

capability of direct action (DA) in enemy rear areas. Also from the intervention in Ukraine, Russia expanded the reconnaissance capability of the Airborne Troops (VDV), effectively tripling the number of Spetsnaz companies in the VDV. Lastly, a more permanent employment of several divisions along the Ukrainian border indicates an intention to maintain pressure on Ukrainian politics in the long-term. Rather than directly orient against a perceived NATO threat, the Russian military can indirectly confront Western powers in its near-abroad via its leverage in Ukraine.⁵⁰

These developments largely mark an improvement in conventional capability. Despite these improvements, Russia has acknowledged a significant and improved role for special operations. Regardless of reform, special operations elements can fulfill a role that conventional forces are not designed or trained to perform. Various Russian security services may perform special operations, but the reform movement focused attention on reforming the Spetsnaz and establishing a SOF force, the SSO. These forces are also hallmarks of the modern Russian military.

Section III: KSO: The Development of Elite Russian SOF

The very “rules of war” have changed. The role of nonmilitary means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness. The focus of applied methods of conflict has altered in the direction of the broad use of political, economic, informational, humanitarian, and other nonmilitary measures—applied in coordination with the protest potential of the population. All this is supplemented by military means of a concealed character, including carrying out actions of informational conflict and the actions of special operations forces. 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.

-General Valeriy Gerasimov
Chief of the Russian General Staff, 2013

The modern Russian conception of warfare embraces an indirect approach to achieving its objectives. Russian SSO fits cleanly into this approach. Two facets explain how SSO became an important tool for achieving Russian objectives. First, SSO belongs to the historical legacy of

⁵⁰ Sutyagin, 50-57, 100-102.

Russian Spetsnaz and of the special operations elements in the non-military security services. Second, the 2008 war in Georgia provided 21st century lessons for how SSO could fit into deliberate Russian campaign; as a shaping element before the onset of hostilities and as a supporting element during hostilities. With those two historical lessons as preface, the advent of an independent KSO extends from the reforms targeting Spetsnaz. After a secretive process, the resulting KSO created a force capable of operational success in Crimea in fewer than five years. The creation and organization of the KSO thus warrants closer examination. So too does the employment of the SSO to Ukraine in 2014.

The Legacy of Special Operations in Russia

Soviet and Russian Spetsnaz forces stand astride the need for military reconnaissance and intelligence assets. Historically, they have been dedicated to reconnaissance, partisan warfare, disrupting enemy supply and communication lines, and targeting NATO nuclear forces in the field.⁵¹ The heritage of special purpose forces in Russia owes to its affiliation with guerilla operations (Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939) as well as the deep operations that envisioned long-range disruption efforts against an enemy's rear area. As an organized force, Spetsnaz's traces its lineage from the experience with partisan and long-range reconnaissance operations of World War II. The onset of the Cold War enabled the Main Intelligence Directorate of the General Staff (GRU) to expand on the idea of Spetsnaz as a force responsible for targeting NATO nuclear weapons.⁵² Thus, for the Soviet military, Spetsnaz served primarily as a reconnaissance force in an enemy's rear area, capable of building a network of foreign agents, of partisan warfare, of sewing disinformation, of conducting sabotage.⁵³

⁵¹ Mark Galeotti, *Spetsnaz: Russia's Special Forces* (New York, NY: Osprey Publishing, 2015), 4-6.

⁵² Galeotti, *Spetsnaz*, 6-18; Marsh, 6-12.

⁵³ Viktor Suvorov, *Spetsnaz: The Inside Story of the Soviet Special Forces* (New York, NY: WW Norton & Company, 1988), 4-51, 85-96, 129-166.

Owing to its experience with partisan operations, Spetsnaz saw service in several proxy wars across the globe. In the Soviet era, Spetsnaz were instrumental in suppressing resistance, as in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968. The 1979 raid in Afghanistan to assassinate the troublesome Afghan president, Operation Storm 333, used Central Asian Soviet Spetsnaz soldiers from the military in a supporting role for the KGB Spetsnaz counter-terrorist assault force. Spetsnaz's role was expanded, perhaps wasted, in that later Afghan war as an effective reconnaissance and rapid-reaction light-infantry force.⁵⁴ By contrast, the modern Russian government better appreciates their specialization, flexibility and economy of force – small elements that may be employed quickly and covertly to support or defeat an insurgency.⁵⁵ To that end, Spetsnaz is not alone.

In the constellation of modern Russian security services, several security forces outside of the military are designed for special operations. These include a raft of forces designated as special purpose and designed for commando operations, often as internal security functions. This includes several police commando units within the Ministry of Internal Affairs that conduct counterterrorism missions and served in combat functions in Chechnya. Additionally, the Federal Security Service (FSB) and Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) maintain elements designed for special operations.⁵⁶

For security within the Russian Federation, the Ministry of Internal Affairs maintains the 140,000-man Interior Troops complete with maneuver brigades, its own aviation branch, and Spetsnaz elements. Spetsnaz elements within the Interior Troops specialize in small-unit direct

⁵⁴ Galeotti, *Spetsnaz*, 6-18.

⁵⁵ Galeotti, *Spetsnaz*, 4-6.

⁵⁶ Galeotti, *Russian Security and Paramilitary Forces since 1991* (New York, NY: Osprey, 2013), 7-33.

action such as hostage rescue and raids.⁵⁷ These elements are designed for service within the borders of the Russian Federation.⁵⁸

Two of Russia's premier special operations units reside in the FSB – Alpha and Vypmel. Alpha is Russia's most well-known counterterrorism unit, dating from the 1970s-era preparation for the 1980 Moscow Olympics. It maintains a primarily domestic role as in the Dubrovka Theater raid in 2002 and the Beslan standoff in 2004, but was famously involved in the assassination raid of the Afghan president in 1979 that began the war in Afghanistan. Alpha's involvement in the political turmoil of the 1990s provides anecdotal insight into the Russian approach to its security services as competing clans that must be balanced. Alpha's refusal to storm the Russian Parliament and arrest Russian President Yeltsin in August 1991 accelerated the collapse of an attempted coup. President Yeltsin would then turn to Alpha in October 1993 to forcibly dissolve Parliament.⁵⁹ While these events firmly belong to a unique political moment, they are instructive for the suspicion and balance of power with which elite security services are viewed.

Vypmel is the other of the premier security forces belonging to the FSB. Vypmel was established in 1981 within the KGB's element responsible for international espionage. As such, its focus was expeditionary missions abroad including hostage rescue, surveillance, assassination and sabotage. Because it refused President Yeltsin's order to seize the parliament in 1993, Vypmel was demoted to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and renamed. Vypmel, gutted, was returned to the FSB in the mid 1990s and placed alongside Alpha in its counterterrorism role. In keeping with its lineage, Vypmel remains more dedicated to surveillance. However, Vypmel is

⁵⁷ Galeotti, *Russian Security and Paramilitary Forces since 1991*, 7-33.

⁵⁸ Galeotti, *Spetsnaz*, 42-43. An additional 175,000 soldiers of the militarized Federal Border Service, subordinate to the FSB, maintain border security along Russia's vast border, the largest land border in the world.

⁵⁹ Galeotti, *Russian Security and Paramilitary Forces Since 1991*, 34-40.

also the lead security agency dedicated to respond to nuclear terrorism and proliferation incidents.⁶⁰

Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) is believed to maintain a unit, Zaslou ("Shield"), to support operations abroad. Highly secretive and not publicly acknowledged, this unit is estimated to number 300 members and dates from the late 1990s. Their mandate includes covert operations including assassination, reconnaissance and sabotage. Scattered media reports have placed them in Syria, Iraq, Libya, Venezuela and Afghanistan.⁶¹

Though these elite security services are designed for various special operations missions, they do not belong to the military chain of command. One can only speculate on the degree to which bureaucratic competition resulted in the Russian military's desire for a similar capability. Nonetheless, to create such a capability, Russia established its KSO and SSO during the period of reform beginning with the War in Georgia.

The Need for SOF in the Georgian War (2008)

The Georgian War in 2008 provides insight into the envisioned roles for SOF: as a shaping force before the war and a supporting force during conventional operations. These acts include the covert shaping operations familiar to SOF as well as the reconnaissance activities to facilitate a limited ground war. Before the war itself, Russia executed a years-long campaign of covert influence. To provoke a Georgian response, in many ways retaliation for the 2008 independence of Kosovo,⁶² Russia escalated tensions through its local proxy partners. During the subsequent ground war, the lack of a proficient SOF force in support of conventional operations showed in several ways.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 40-42.

⁶¹ Ibid., 50; Ahmed Hassan, "Meet Zaslou, Russia's ultra-secretive unit," *Newsrep*, February 4, 2019, accessed March 11, 2019, <https://thenewsrep.com/113598/meet-zaslou-russias-ultra-secretive-unit/>.

⁶² Andrei Illarionov, "The Russian Leadership's Preparation for War, 1999-2008," in Svante E. Cornell and Frederick Starr, eds, *The Guns of August 2008: Russia's War in Georgia* (Armonk, NY: ME Sharpe Inc, 2009), 67.

Many of the shaping activities that Russia undertook in Georgia in the lead up to the Georgian war in 2008 were ideally suited for SOF elements: understanding political dynamics, special reconnaissance, support to foreign security forces, and sabotage. Beginning in the early 2000s, Russia became more confrontational with Georgia and used South Ossetia as a lever in that conflict. To that end, the Russians infiltrated forces into South Ossetia and Abkhazia to organize resistance networks and to subvert any attempt at Georgian-Ossetian reconciliation.⁶³ Russian security services met with South Ossetian political leaders in 2001 to prevent détente between Ossetia and Georgia. In 2002, the Russian Air Force bombed – and denied bombing – the Pankisi Gorge in Georgia under the auspices of targeting terrorists. Periodic aerial incursions and bombardments continued through 2008. The Russians supplied a significant amount of military equipment, including tanks, to South Ossetia. In 2005, an allegedly GRU-orchestrated act of sabotage destroyed a police headquarters in Gori, Georgia.⁶⁴ In the summer of 2008, Ossetian separatists increased the tempo of their provocative acts through the use of small-scale attacks.⁶⁵ All of these acts were important precursors for the coming war. Though the Georgians may have miscalculated the Russian and Western response, the war of August 2008 resulted from a longer campaign of Russian provocations.⁶⁶ This campaign was led by various elements of the Russian security services, but highlights the role that SSO might take in shaping a foreign target.

During the Russian invasion, several military deficiencies became apparent, many of which might be improved with a SOF partnership: reconnaissance, air-ground integration, Unconventional Warfare (UW) and counter-SOF efforts. The race for the South Ossetian capital,

⁶³ United States Army Training and Doctrine Command G-2 Analysis & Control Element Threats Integration, *Threat Tactics Report: Russia Version 1.1* (US Army: Fort Leavenworth, KS, 2015), 7-17.

⁶⁴ Illarionov, 49-59.

⁶⁵ US Army, *Threat Tactics Report: Russia Version 1.1* (2015), 7-17.

⁶⁶ Johanna Popjanevski, “From Sukhumi to Tshkhinvali: The Path to War in Georgia,” in Svante E. Cornell and Frederick Starr, eds, *The Guns of August 2008: Russia’s War in Georgia* (Armonk, NY: ME Sharpe Inc, 2009), 160-161.

Tskhinvali, required the southward advancing Russians to delay the northward advancing Georgian Army. Russian and separatist elements in the capital provided early warning, created obstacles, and conducted limited harassing attacks through the use of weapons in pre-positioned caches. These Russian efforts successfully disrupted the Georgian advance, and though the Georgians initially seized Tskhinvali, Russian maneuver elements forced a Georgian withdrawal within 72 hours. Then, as the Russians prepared to advance towards Tblisi, Russian special purpose forces inserted into Gori, an intermediate objective, to conduct reconnaissance for the advancing Russian forces.⁶⁷

Sources of friction identified during the Georgian War resulted in broader conventional reform as well as an expanded recognition of the role of SSO. At the war's end, the Russian commander identified two primary problems with the invading force: poor communications and badly designed command relationships.⁶⁸ Moreover, throughout the campaign, Russian air-to-ground coordination was inefficient and reduced the effectiveness of aerial bombardment against the retreating Georgians.⁶⁹ The Georgians surprised the Russians with the use of advanced anti-aircraft systems, shooting down as many as nineteen Russian aircraft. The Russians did not even know that the Georgians possessed such systems. Nevertheless, the majority of Georgian casualties were inflicted by the Russian Air Force near the South Ossetian capital, Tskhinvali; the initial objective for both Georgian and Russian forces. Even so, the Georgians successfully

⁶⁷ US Army, *Threat Tactics Report: Russia Version 1.1* (2015), 7-17.

⁶⁸ Thornton, 16-20. Airborne elements traveled hundreds of kilometers to South Ossetia faster than the ground elements poised immediately across the border. Reconnaissance assets failed to identify the movement and massing of Georgian forces nor to provide much else in the way of useful intelligence. Several Russian aircraft were shot down; Russia could not sufficiently suppress Georgian air defenses. Command and control failed in the face of poor communication, both a technical and organizational flaw. Joint cooperation between ground elements and air assets suffered from lack of unity of effort. Failing satellite communications disrupted C2. Individual elements, particularly the airborne units, displayed initiative with independent operations; in general, units with more contracted soldiers were perceived to have performed better than those with fewer. The Russians lacked basic modern equipment – tanks with access to GPS or thermal sites, artillery with counterbattery radar, night vision for most troops.

⁶⁹ US Army, *Threat Tactics Report: Russia Version 1.1* (2015), 7-17.

employed reconnaissance assets to direct precision artillery fires against advancing Russian armored columns. Additionally, the Abkhazian army, nearly 10,000 strong, was led by Russian officers.⁷⁰ Each of these features of the invasion might very well have been improved by a SOF force dedicated to supporting a conventional force.

Russian operations in Georgia, resulting from success and failure, encouraged an appreciation for the benefits of SSO: speed, mobility, disruption, reconnaissance, coordination with local proxies, air-ground integration and the disruption of enemy SOF. Reform thus came to Spetsnaz much as it did to the conventional force.

The Reform of Russian Spetsnaz

The establishment of the KSO may be seen as an effort to tidy up the military and intelligence distinctions desirable after the Georgian war. In the resulting bureaucratic infighting, Spetsnaz became briefly, perhaps only nominally, subordinate to the Russian Military District commands while the GRU was delineated as an espionage force.⁷¹ Spetsnaz units were cut significantly and their role was reduced to deep reconnaissance and direct action behind enemy lines. This began an evolution towards a purer reconnaissance role. General Makarov, then Chief of the General Staff, intended to remake Spetsnaz into an independent reconnaissance brigade for Army (or Navy) elements.⁷²

Under Makarov's vision, Spetsnaz would become primarily an independent brigade in each military district with two chains of command – one to the GRU and one to the military district command. Each Spetsnaz brigade would consist of battalion-sized detachments, so named because of their lineage from World War II guerilla detachments. Each brigade would have three

⁷⁰ Pavel Felgenhauer, "After August 7: The Escalation of the Russia-Georgia War," in Svante E. Cornell and Frederick Starr, eds, *The Guns of August 2008: Russia's War in Georgia* (Armonk, NY: ME Sharpe Inc, 2009), 162-180.

⁷¹ Galeotti, *Spetsnaz*, 42-45.

⁷² Ramm, 14-15.

such Spetsnaz detachments, a combat support detachment (armored vehicle company, mortar battery, Anti-Tank (AT) battery, UAV detachment, Electronic Warfare (EW) company) a special radio communication detachment and supply elements. Each Spetsnaz detachment would have three companies, a sniper group, and a special radio communication detachment. Each Spetsnaz company would contain three (possibly four) Spetsnaz groups of 14 soldiers.⁷³

With the appointment of General Gerasimov as the Chief of the General Staff in 2012, the GRU found an ally equally interested in non-linear warfare. Gerasimov reversed many of Makarov's tentative reforms, including a plan to create nine KSO brigades.⁷⁴ Moreover, the GRU reasserted control over Spetsnaz in 2013, regaining clear standing as a special operations element.⁷⁵ Spetsnaz thus resumed responsibility for Direct Action (DA), Special Reconnaissance (SR), and UW.⁷⁶ As a likely concession to the Ground Forces, General Gerasimov removed the Spetsnaz designation from several units to convert them to pure reconnaissance assets for conventional elements. Complicating a closer study, most of the information on Spetsnaz from the Gerasimov era has become classified.⁷⁷

As a result of these reforms, modern Spetsnaz elements perform a dual role, that of special reconnaissance and that of direct action behind enemy lines to target high-value targets. By contrast, the KSO is envisioned to assume responsibility for strategic reconnaissance and direct action that emanate from the Russian national leadership as well as unconventional

⁷³ Alexey Ramm, "Russian Military Special Forces" in *Elite Warriors: Special Operations Forces From Around the World*, Ruslan Pukhov and Christopher Marsh, eds. (Minneapolis, MN: East View Press, 2017), 4-5, 9-10, 14-15. Some military districts had two brigade-sized elements; each naval fleet also had a reconnaissance station. Naval Spetsnaz called Naval Reconnaissance Stations (NRS) remain subordinate to the Navy. There are four such NRS, one for each of the four fleets. These are approximately battalion-sized elements with similar mandates as the Army's Spetsnaz, with the addition of additional dive training and maritime infiltration techniques. The VDV also maintains a Spetsnaz regiment though it does not report to the GRU and functions much the same as other Spetsnaz elements.

⁷⁴ Ramm, 5-7.

⁷⁵ Galeotti, *Spetsnaz*, 42-45.

⁷⁶ Ramm, 1-3.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 8-10; Galeotti, *Spetsnaz*, 45.

warfare. Thus, General Gerasimov appears to have appointed both Spetsnaz and SSO as elements designed for Unconventional Warfare.⁷⁸

Russian Special Operations Forces

Regardless of the waffling nature of Spetsnaz reforms, the establishment of the Special Operations Command, KSO, survived. General Gerasimov publicly acknowledged SSO in early 2013, declaring that the KSO would be designated for overseas operations ranging from peacekeeping to intervention.⁷⁹ In this way, SSO would maintain the military's overseas ability to supplement intelligence or military operations.⁸⁰ Even though it has been publicly acknowledged, the KSO has secretive origins that are difficult to identify. Its genesis, its facilities, its units, its commanders and its employment are rarely acknowledged by the Russian government. Nevertheless, some of the contours of KSO have been traced in open source reporting.

The idea of a Russian Special Operations Command may date from the 1990s, even as its origin owes to the reform era of 2008 onward. Colonel Vladimir Kvachkov, a former Spetsnaz brigade commander, lobbied for the creation of a distinct Special Operations Forces command explicitly to focus on operations outside of Russia.⁸¹ Kvachkov argued, even writing an influential book on the subject, "Spetsnaz of Russia" in 2004, that Russia needed a theory of special operations and that all of Russia's special operations elements should fall under a unified Russian Special Operations Command.⁸² Nonetheless, the same bureaucratic obstacles for conventional reform applied to the establishment of KSO: a lack of resources, negligible infrastructure and human capital; and institutional resistance from both the GRU and the VDV as

⁷⁸ Ramm, 1-3.

⁷⁹ Alexey Nikolsky, "Russian Special Operations Forces: Eight Years and Three Wars," in *Elite Warriors: Special Operations Forces From Around the World*, Ruslan Pukhov and Christopher Marsh, eds. (Minneapolis, MN: East View Press, 2017), 21-22.

⁸⁰ Galeotti, *Spetsnaz*, 42-43.

⁸¹ Nikolsky, "Russian Special Operations Forces: Eight Years and Three Wars," 21.

⁸² Marsh, 2-3; Nikolsky, "Russian Special Operations Forces: Eight Years and Three Wars," 21.

they objected to creating KSO from their existing organizations.⁸³ To this day, KSO reportedly continues to have difficulty manning its ranks and having the resources necessary for UW.⁸⁴

In addition to Kvachkov's influence, Defense Minister Serdyukov and General Makarov surveyed western SOF elements and decided to emulate the model of a force with specialized training, higher discipline and better physical and mental fitness.⁸⁵ The initial implementation of the KSO appears to have been led at the Ministry of Defense until 2010 by Col. Igor Medoyev, a Hero of the Russian Federation (the state's highest honorary title), and former FSB officer.⁸⁶ KSO's command would oversee SSO forces, but not Spetsnaz elements writ large who would remain subordinate to the GRU. Thus, KSO is not intended to be analogous to the US Special Operations Command which controls all of the American military's special operations forces. Institutional resistance from the GRU, among others, makes any such reorganization unlikely in the near term. An important distinction, Spetsnaz are, by and large, designed to be sustained by the military commands they support. SSO, on the other hand, operate independently, a fact which enables KSO to plan and control missions that require special political sensitivity.⁸⁷

Despite its secretive origins, Russian journalists estimate that KSO was established in 2009, deducing the evolution of the command from open-sourced government construction appropriations. The construction of the compound serving as the KSO command facility appears to date from an April 2009 directive. Then-defense minister Shoigu accelerated the funding of facilities and equipment for SSO.⁸⁸ In 2010, the Senezh training center was removed from GRU

⁸³ Nikolsky, "Russian Special Operations Forces: Eight Years and Three Wars," 21-22.

⁸⁴ Ramm, 5-7.

⁸⁵ Marsh, 12-14; Alexey Nikosky, "Little, Green and Polite: The Creation of Russian Special Operations Forces," in . *Brothers Armed: Military Aspects of the Crisis in Ukraine*, Colby Howard and Ruslan Pukhov, eds. (Minneapolis, MN: East View Press, 2015), 125.

⁸⁶ Nikosky, "Little, Green and Polite: The Creation of Russian Special Operations Forces," 129.

⁸⁷ Nikosky, "Little, Green and Polite: The Creation of Russian Special Operations Forces," 126-127.

⁸⁸ Nikolsky, "Russian Special Operations Forces: Eight Years and Three Wars," 21-24.

control and given to the General Staff to become the headquarters of the KSO command. KSO absorbed an additional site, the Center for Special Designation, at Kubinka in 2013.⁸⁹ Kubinka and Senezh, both on the outskirts of Moscow, appear to be the two foremost KSO sites, the latter being the primary training facility for Russian and other soldiers. Since 2014, an additional SSO base resides in Sevastopol for unknown reasons (See Figure 3). Spending on compounds in Senezh and Kubinka reached \$120 million between 2012-2014. This money went towards building physical infrastructure such as headquarters and housing, as well as training facilities for wheeled vehicles. Spending in 2015 at the Kubinka facility suggests training facilities will focus on Surface-to-Air Missile (SAM) and AT systems. Interestingly, the KSO's ability to place its own procurement orders gives it a service-like status.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Galeotti, *Spetsnaz*, 43; Marsh, 15.

⁹⁰ Nikolsky, "Russian Special Operations Forces: Eight Years and Three Wars," 22-26.



Figure 3. Suspected Basing Locations of SSO Elements. Terskol hosts a mountaineering training center. For officer-candidates, Ryazan houses the Department of Special and Military Intelligence and the Department of the Use of Special Forces. Another such location is the Department of Special Intelligence in Novosibirsk.

Created by author from Nikolsky, “Russian Special Operations Forces: Eight Years and Three Wars,” 22-26; Marsh, 15-17; Defense Intelligence Agency, *Russia Military Power: Building a Military to Support Great Power Aspirations* (Washington, DC: Defense Intelligence Agency, 2017), 14.

To man the unit, then Chief of the General Staff Makarov established the SSO out of Unit 92154 in 2010. Unit 92154 was a GRU element in Senezh, itself established in 1999 for the second Chechen War.⁹¹ In preparation for the Sochi Olympics, KSO established the 346th Spetsnaz Brigade in Prokhladny in southern Russia as an SSO formation, though this may have been later reabsorbed.⁹² In addition to its ground elements, KSO owns a special combat aviation

⁹¹ Nikolsky, “Russian Special Operations Forces: Eight Years and Three Wars,” 21-22.

⁹² Galeotti, *Spetsnaz*, 45.

brigade at Torzhok and a lift squadron in Migalovo.⁹³ At Senezh, Unit 99450 currently serves as the KSO headquarters. The number of soldiers within the command is unknown but estimates range from 500 to 2500 soldiers.⁹⁴ (See Appendix 2 for Suspected Task Organization)

Deduced from procurement and equipping patterns, the KSO appears to currently comprise or envision five combat divisions, each with its own specialization, as well as a division each for training, “deployment and evacuation,” and “operational application.” Each of the combat divisions maintains as many as fifty support personnel; all officers. Contracted enlisted soldiers appear to support KSO at the Senezh compound.⁹⁵

Based on procurement documents, Unit 92154 appears to be collocated with the KSO headquarters at Senezh. Their equipment procurement implies capabilities for airborne and maritime infiltration, engineering and CBRN protection, as well as organic artillery, vehicle mobility, organic logistics capability across all classes of supply and weapons testing and procurement. At the headquarters level, one duty squad of 36 operators appears to maintain on-call readiness status at all times.⁹⁶

Unit 43292, also at Senezh, currently appears to be the training division, responsible for operational training as well as the selection and assessment pipeline. Forty five instructors are assigned to the unit for that purpose. The training division controls the sniper training course as well as an Electronic Warfare training element. A special service group is suspected to develop specialty equipment for particular missions.⁹⁷

Parallel to establishing the KSO, the defense ministry also established a deputy minister of defense for SSO in 2009, a position typically held by a Major General. At least two of these

⁹³ Marsh, 17; Galeotti, *Spetsnaz*, 43.

⁹⁴ Nikolsky, “Russian Special Operations Forces: Eight Years and Three Wars,” 22-24.

⁹⁵ Nikosky, “Little, Green and Polite: The Creation of Russian Special Operations Forces,” 128.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 127-129.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 128.

deputy ministers have backgrounds in the FSB. KSO commanders are not often publicly identifiable, but in the early years, appear to have FSB backgrounds as well. The appointment of commanders with FSB backgrounds suggests a desire to monitor the development of SSO. This is likely for three reasons: to monitor the development of a capability to be exercised by the Russian national command authority; to monitor the development of a command which might serve as an alternate power base for would-be coup-plotters (a domestic stability imperative); and to access qualified personnel in the absence of alternatives.⁹⁸

Beginning in 2010 under the tenure of Deputy Defense Minister Major General Aleksandr Miroshnichenko, a former Alfa commander within the FSB, SSO focused on counterterrorism training. Miroshnichenko prioritized direct action, raids and individual training programs. Because this vision for SSO apparently deviated from the vision of other SSO officers, defense minister Serdyukov established Unit 01355 to be trained as Miroshnichenko saw fit.⁹⁹

In their young ten years, SSO have participated in numerous operations. These operations include security for the Sochi Olympics, counterterrorist operations in the Caucasus, the annexation of Crimea, and operations in Syria. They are likely to have been involved in operations in the Donbass region of Ukraine. One of the first appearances of SSO in the media was a 2013 Russian television report showing parachute and alpine training, likely as a public messaging campaign in preparation for the 2014 Sochi Olympics. In Crimea, SSO are believed to have participated with GRU Spetsnaz in the seizure of key objectives such as the Crimean assembly and various Army and Navy command posts.¹⁰⁰ Supported by VDV Spetsnaz, the fifty men who seized the Crimean Parliament building on February 27th, 2014 marked the first

⁹⁸ Nikolsky, "Russian Special Operations Forces: Eight Years and Three Wars," 22-25. Until 2012, the Unit 92154 commander was Col Aleksei Galkin, a fellow Hero of the Russian Federation, and former prisoner of Chechen rebels. He was replaced in 2012 by Col Oleg Martyanov.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 24-25.

¹⁰⁰ Nikolsky, "Russian Special Operations Forces: Eight Years and Three Wars," 28-30.

deployment of the KSO.¹⁰¹ Media reports suggest that SSO were deployed to Syria in September 2015 to assist with the recovery of a downed pilot and to conduct strikes against the rebels responsible. SSO are also believed to conduct reconnaissance in support of air strikes. A 2016 state television report claimed that SSO operations in Syria emphasized target acquisition for aerial bombardment, and direct-action targeting rebel leaders. SSO was also instrumental in both of the Syrian Army efforts to re-take Palmyra from ISIS in March 2016 and March 2017.¹⁰²

These known and suspected operations for SSO have become more widely celebrated by the Russian government, even as their discrete operations are not. Indeed, in 2015, President Putin announced that February 27th would be the official holiday of Russian SSO, the same date SSO took control of the Crimean assembly.¹⁰³ Indeed, operations in Ukraine validated Russian reform efforts to wage offensive operations effectively, including special operations. Between the campaign in Crimea and the Donbas, Russian SSO can be seen respectively as a main effort force for unconventional warfare and as a supporting effort for conventional intervention. In both cases, SSO's covert capability and UW expertise working with proxies contributed to operational success.

Crimea is the foremost example of the use of covert Russian forces to combine ambiguity and disinformation with overt military action to achieve strategic objectives below the threshold that invites a military response. Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 has reframed the Western approach to European security and the perception of Russian subversion worldwide.¹⁰⁴ On the night of 27 February 2014, a company-sized element of unidentified forces claiming to be Crimean self-defense forces seized the Parliament and ministers' building in Simferopol, the Crimean capital. The same night, the seizure of the airports in Simferopol and Sevastopol by

¹⁰¹ Galeotti, *Spetsnaz*, 50.

¹⁰² Nikolsky, "Russian Special Operations Forces: Eight Years and Three Wars," 28-30.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁰⁴ Larrabee, Wilson and Gordon, 6-7.

hundreds of unidentified soldiers enabled Russia to reinforce its presence via air. The next day, forces likewise seized television and telecommunications hubs to control the flow of information. A week later, forces seized additional media stations and replaced local television coverage with Russian media. Russian forces sequestered Ukrainian military to their bases, prevented outside observers from entering Crimea, and blocked dissenting internet sites. All of these efforts enabled Russia to control the flow of information into and out of Crimea. Throughout mid-March, Russian and local forces continued to consolidate control over smaller Ukrainian military outposts. In all, Russia seized 189 Ukrainian sites and the Ukrainian military largely surrendered rather than fight.¹⁰⁵ Enacting a GRU plan over the span of a few weeks, Russia annexed Crimea with very few casualties. Russian forces, including SSO, covertly infiltrated into Crimea, seized key military infrastructure and civilian government facilities. The speed of the action precluded a firm Western response.¹⁰⁶

Russia's approach to creating discord in eastern Ukraine required a different tack. There, overt military exercises of massed Russian troops on Russian territory were designed to intimidate Ukrainians and seek a psychological effect.¹⁰⁷ Russian ground forces supported SSO efforts to destabilize territory within Ukraine while avoiding requirements to acknowledge their military exercises in accordance with international treaties.¹⁰⁸ After the downing of a civilian airliner focused the world's attention on Russian support and direction to rebels in Eastern Ukraine, Russian covert operations became much more widely acknowledged. Subsequently, Putin remained boldly committed to the strategy by covertly employing conventional elements in

¹⁰⁵ US Army, *Threat Tactics Report: Russia Version 1.1*, 20-31.

¹⁰⁶ Larrabee, Wilson and Gordon, 6-7.

¹⁰⁷ Larrabee, Wilson and Gordon, 7-8.

¹⁰⁸ Sutyagin and Bronk, 12-16. Russia agreed to declare exercises to the Organization for Security Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) of military activities in accordance with stipulations from the Vienna Document of 2011. Russian ground forces thus avoided these requirements by two primary methods. Russia deployed elements to the border with Ukraine in fewer than 9,000 soldiers, the threshold requirement for notification. Additionally, Russia denied that elements massing on the border were operating in concert or centrally commanded.

eastern Ukraine.¹⁰⁹ The commitment of Russian forces prevented the Ukrainian security forces from defeating the separatists.¹¹⁰

Russia preceded its actions in eastern Ukraine by infiltrating elements to advise and guide the pro-Russian separatists. Unlike Crimea, the native Donbass population, less ethnically Russian, was less receptive to a complete takeover by Russia. This necessitated more deliberate information efforts targeting the host population with messages of oppression by the central government in Kiev. Russia likely began infiltrating covert operatives to build subversive networks in the early 2000s. Covert Russian operatives began to operationalize their subversive networks into a pro-Russian insurgency. In March and April of 2014, protests against the central government became more aggressive, as demonstrators supported by Russian operatives began seizing and occupying government buildings in Donetsk and Lugansk. They then began establishing a shadow government of separatists and calling for independence from Ukraine. Separatist control of Russian border crossings enabled Russian military forces to infiltrate men, weapons and equipment more effectively into the rebelling provinces. Civilian confrontations with Ukrainian security forces enabled the Russian-directed rebels to overcome a conventional force overmatch and depict the Ukrainian military as incompetent. Over the summer, separatists increased the harassing attacks, using indirect fire and snipers. International observers sporadically identified tanks belonging to Russia. In early fall, despite the Minsk cease-fire in September, Russian-backed separatists fought with Ukrainian military elements for control of the Donetsk airport. The stalemate largely consisted of indirect fire exchanges, but Russia continued

¹⁰⁹ Sutyagin and Bronk, 32-42. Some estimates posit that Russia's mobilization to the destabilization of Ukraine required 90,000 troops, over 30% of the Russian Ground Forces. Sustaining the offensive throughout 2014 required rotations from units across Russia, notable for requiring such a wide mobilization. Aside from offering a testbed for combat operations (notably for artillery and Electronic Warfare units), such a mobilization appears to result from local manpower shortages for sustained operations. Moreover, Siberian units brought their organic vehicles and equipment, suggesting that pre-positioned stocks were either employed or insufficient. Lastly, media reports surfaced of conscripted soldiers forced to sign enlistment contracts to allow them to be deployed to the Ukrainian combat theater, a mark of manpower shortages.

¹¹⁰ Larrabee, Wilson and Gordon, 8-9.

to deny involvement despite the obvious presence of Russian armored elements, indirect fire assets and special purpose forces.¹¹¹ By design, attribution to SSO or any other element is difficult to prove. Nevertheless, SSO are widely suspected to have played a role in shaping the events of eastern Ukraine.¹¹²

Proven effective in fewer than five years, Russian SSO is an innovation that improves on Russia's long experience with special operations. It resembles its Spetsnaz forerunners and creates a parallel operational capability with non-military security services. Despite an origin and composition that is not widely acknowledged nor well understood, the available information indicates a commitment to the SSO as a way for the Russian military to serve policy decisions at the highest level. Russian SSO may be used as a shaping force before the onset of hostilities, as an independent force that wages unconventional warfare, or as a supplement to more conventional operations. This versatility became known through its effects in Ukraine. By deducing from suspected role of SSO in Ukraine in 2014, the nature of the Russian approach to special operations becomes more evident. The next section elaborates on the modern Russian theory of special operations.

Section IV: Analysis: A Theory of Russian SSO

For what purpose did Russia establish its Special Operations Command? Improving a high-end SOF-centric expeditionary capability beyond its borders appears to be a confirmed, if insufficient, explanation for the advent of KSO. Rather, despite the many unknowns of KSO, there appear to be four notable features that define Russia's use of special operations: as an expeditionary force designed for discreet operations that blur Russian attribution; as an economy of force element that maximizes effects for minimal resourcing; as a force multiplier for

¹¹¹ US Army, *Threat Tactics Report: Russia Version 1.1*, 34-48.

¹¹² Nikolsky, "Russian Special Operations Forces: Eight Years and Three Wars," 28-30.

conventional elements; and as a function of competition among security services. Each of these features is explored below.

Russian SSO enables the Russian preference for indirect methods to achieve its strategic objectives. Many serious inquiries have attempted to understand the modern Russian approach to warfare. Names for this indirect approach vary: “grey zone” operations, “hybrid warfare,” “new generation warfare,” or simply “competition short of conflict.” Russia itself uses the term “indirect and asymmetric methods.” According to these methods, the Russians employ covert and nonmilitary means in greater proportion than overt conventional means to blur the line between war and peace. Descriptions of this theory of warfare identify a core approach that emulates a perceived Western approach, methods which seek to act below a threshold that invites a conventional response.¹¹³

General Gerasimov, sometimes cited as the progenitor for Russia’s indirect approach, merely attempted to describe a Western approach to international action that Russia perceived in the Arab Spring and the color revolutions in Russia’s near abroad.¹¹⁴ Insofar as the Russian SSO emulates the Western view of special operations, the Western approach warrants attention. In the

¹¹³ For an elaboration on the Russian approach to hybrid warfare, see Christopher Marsh, “Russian Risk, Hybrid Warfare, and the Gray Zone,” monograph, Joint Special Operations University, 2018; Charles K. Bartles. “Russia’s Indirect and Asymmetric Methods as a Response to the New Western Way of War,” *Special Operations Journal* 2, no. 1, (2016), accessed March 21, 2019, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23296151.2016.1134964#_i5; Amos Fox, “Hybrid Warfare: The 21st Century Russian Way of Warfare,” Monograph, School of Advanced Military Studies, US Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 2017, accessed March 21, 2019, <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/1038987.pdf>; Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 1-02, *Terms and Military Symbols* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2015), 1-42; Robert R. Leonhard and Stephen P. Philips, “Little Green Men”: A Primer on Modern Russian Unconventional Warfare, Ukraine 2013-2014 (Fort Bragg, NC: US Army Special Operations Command, 2015), 17-18; John Arquilla, “Perils of the Gray Zone: Paradigms Lost, Paradoxes Regained,” *Prism* 7, no. 3 (May 2018), accessed March 19, 2019, <https://cco.ndu.edu/News/Article/1507653/perils-of-the-gray-zone-paradigms-lost-paradoxes-regained/>; “Neither war nor peace: The uses of constructive ambiguity,” *The Economist*, January 25, 2018, accessed March 21, 2019, <https://www.economist.com/special-report/2018/01/25/neither-war-nor-peace>.

¹¹⁴ Charles K. Bartles. “Russia’s Indirect and Asymmetric Methods as a Response to the New Western Way of War,” *Special Operations Journal* 2, no. 1, (2016), accessed March 21, 2019, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23296151.2016.1134964#_i5

Western approach, special operations seek to attrite the enemy moral and material center of gravity in concert with conventional force.¹¹⁵ This may be in support of conventional forces conducting Large Scale Combat Operations or, more likely, as an enabler for policymakers to confront challenges below the threshold of war.¹¹⁶

Indeed, SOF serves as a strategic asset, a precision tool for high risk operations or indirect effects. It requires unique training and equipment. SOF operations are appreciated as sensitive or even covert or clandestine, but in all cases politically influential.¹¹⁷ A hallmark of SOF is its ability to operate in hostile or politically sensitive areas. SOF's distinctness is typically marked by its proximity to indigenous populations. The risk profile for a special operation is marked both by its elevated risk to the SOF force itself, but particularly to the increased risk that mission failure may have larger political implications. Indirect approaches reduce the political capital and resource expenditure of the country employing SOF.¹¹⁸

By consequence of this emulation, Russian SSO is a small, if central, component of the Russian indirect approach; it emulates a Western approach and can operate covertly to assist Russia in denying attribution for its actions. The Russians appear to have created the KSO as recognition that the military lacked an elite force that could operate covertly and be used as a precision tool for strategic effects. Spetsnaz may be the more appropriate tool, for example, to supplement conventional operations in the target acquisition cycle to facilitate long-range indirect

¹¹⁵ James Kiras, *Special Operations and Strategy: From World War II to the War on Terrorism* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 58-82.

¹¹⁶ H. Allen Holmes, "Special Operations Forces as a Strategic Asset in the 21st Century," in *Special Operations Forces: Roles and Missions in the Aftermath of the Cold War*, Schultz, Richard, Robert Pfaltzgraff and W. Bradley Stock, eds. (Tampa, FL: US Special Operations Command, 1994) 159-164.

¹¹⁷ Christopher J. Lamb, "Perspectives on Emerging SOF Roles and Missions: The View from the Office of the Secretary of Defense," in *Special Operations Forces: Roles and Missions in the Aftermath of the Cold War*, Schultz, Richard, Robert Pfaltzgraff and W. Bradley Stock, eds. (Tampa, FL: US Special Operations Command, 1994) 199-208.

¹¹⁸ David Tucker and Christopher J. Lamb, *United States Special Operations Forces* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2007), 143-178.

fires.¹¹⁹ SSO, while capable of such an effort, should be considered in contrast to Spetsnaz. Indeed, when the KSO began to be trained more for a CT/DA role, Russian leadership incorporated Unit 03155 into KSO with that mandate in mind. By implication, the KSO appears to be destined for an expanded UW role. It thus appears reasonable to infer that KSO is designed for covert operations directed from the Russian national command authority.

Thus, the expansion of an SSO capability matches well the contemporary Russian emphasis on strategic ambiguity based on stealth, surprise, and disinformation.¹²⁰ The use of mercenaries in Ukraine for covert action is one such indication of a desire for deniability and non-attributable influence. The ability to deny responsibility for action enables the Kremlin to delay and manipulate the West's rules-based order to play for time.¹²¹ Recent history suggests that the Russians will use covert means to infiltrate into a target area to recruit local agents and build an intelligence and insurgent network. These efforts will be supplemented by cyber, electronic warfare, and information efforts to destabilize the target and legitimize Russian activity. Resulting social unrest can then be attributed to local forces and allow Russia a degree of deniability. These actions then expand options for a more overt use of military force.¹²² The Russian KSO serves all of these purposes as a unified command dedicated to considering the use of SSO in a role that enhances the Russian government's ability to achieve plausible deniability.

Next, SSO should be considered in the light of conventional military reform as an exploration of a way to economize forces. Neither Russian demography nor economic power augur well for Russian regional hegemony. As a result, indirect methods improve Russia's ability

¹¹⁹ AWG, 16-20.

¹²⁰ F. Stephen Larrabee, Peter Wilson, and John Gordon, eds, *The Ukrainian Crisis and European Security: Implications for the United States and U.S. Army* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2015), ix.

¹²¹ Sutyagin, 116-117.

¹²² US Army Training and Doctrine Command G-2 Analysis & Control Element Threats Integration, *Threat Tactics Report: Russia Version 1.1* (US Army: Fort Leavenworth, KS, 2015), 5.

to pursue its objectives. Discrete special operation may annihilate a particular target as in a great raid, but the true strategic value comes from sustained application of economy-of-force operations designed to break the resolve of an enemy.¹²³ For a cost-effective investment in men and material, SSO can achieve an outsized effect on an adversary's moral resolve. With that in mind, SSO can conduct missions that conventional forces are not capable of performing at an acceptable risk level. Thus, in addition to sewing confusion and promoting deniability, SSO can act as an enabler for proxy forces to preserve Russian military manpower and economic resources.¹²⁴

Further, as the experience in Georgia in 2008 and eastern Ukraine in 2014 implies, SSO can serve a supplementary role to improve conventional operations. The Russian invasion in Georgia proved the need for a force that improved reconnaissance, air-ground integration, UW, and counter-SOF targeting. These are, not surprisingly core capabilities of the SSO. The SSO operations in Crimea demonstrated the improvement of Russian UW capability in the span of a few short years. Their role in eastern Ukraine is more difficult to pinpoint, but likely includes a role as a reconnaissance element and an enabler of proxy forces for UW. In all three cases, the ability of SSO to complement conventional operations is evident.

Lastly, the dynamic of competing clans within domestic Russian politics appears to bear on the development of Russia's KSO. Competing views within the military about the role of the GRU clearly bore on the decision to alter the Spetsnaz chain of command to the operational commands and then back to the GRU. Similarly, resistance from the GRU and the VDV delayed the creation of the KSO and limited its scope to a singular SSO force. Interagency competition again marked the decision to staff the KSO with former FSB officials. Surely not far from the minds of Russian senior leadership is the role that Alpha and Vympel played (or refused to play)

¹²³ James Kiras, *Special Operations and Strategy: From World War II to the War on Terrorism* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 58-82.

¹²⁴ AWG, 16-20.

as assault elements in the political turmoil of the 1990s. Not surprisingly, the military chose to create a parallel capability for elite special operations that previously existed in the FSB and SVR. Internal deliberations about competition between the security services remain largely secretive, but can be inferred by the resulting development of the KSO.

Implications

Understanding these different characterizations of the Russian SSO leaves yet unanswered the options for countering the Russian influence resulting from their improved elite special operations capability at DA and UW. Each characterization deserves attention for the implications it suggests for how to counter it. First, SSO as a means to enable an indirect approach recommends a sustained effort to ensure Western access and influence. Second, SSO as an economy-of-force element reinforces the importance of attributing to Russia its overseas malfeasance. Third, insofar as SSO may complement conventional operations, Western planners must account for rear-guard actions. Lastly, the nature of competing clans across Russian security services suggests that SSO may not always neatly nest their efforts with larger Russian intentions.

To counter SSO as a means for Russia's indirect methods requires the West to pursue similar access and influence among contested populations. This access and influence must be achieved cognitively, socially and physically. Cognitively, in the minds of targeted populations, counter-Russian planners must craft narratives about Russian malevolence and foreign interference and encourage receptiveness to counter-Russian efforts. At a social level, messaging must be accompanied by efforts to build networks among receptive governments and populations to organize resistance to Russian interference. Physically, these ideas amount to the appropriation of resources to conduct information operations and reinforce a message of commitment to competing for the human terrain. Western SOF may be used to build networks, affirm commitment to vulnerable populations, and both identify and counteract discrete SSO operations.

Secondly, employing indirect methods through small SSO elements suggests a preference for economizing force to pursue objectives. The covert, clandestine or small nature of these actions enables Russia to deny attribution for its actions. To counter such SSO activities, SSO must be identified as the responsible party. Attributing SSO action to Russia is alone insufficient to crafting an effective response, but it is a necessary prerequisite to ensuring cognitive, social and physical access and influence. The response then must also be achieved across the same three spaces. Cognitively, populations must be mobilized at the individual level to be willing to resist. Socially, government and popular networks must identify SSO efforts, build the capacity to resist SSO targeted attacks, and address popular grievances that Russian SSO may exploit. Physically, this may amount to the dedication of intelligence collection assets to suspected SSO operations, the dedication of an information apparatus to attribute SSO activity to Russia, or the employment of counter-Russian forces to assist foreign forces with their internal security.

Thirdly, the SSO as a complement to conventional operations increases the threat posed to a counter-Russian belligerent. Unlike the UW focus detailed above, the threat to conventional belligerents engaged in a war with Russia would be posed both by an elite UW and an elite DA capability. Thus, a weaker opponent's senior government or military officials might be targeted by SSO. So too, critical military or civilian infrastructure may be targeted. This is in addition to the prospect of SSO subversive and insurgent networks engaging in hostilities. In a conventional combat scenario, for both large and small opponents of Russia, the effectiveness of the SSO demands more attention be paid to the protection of critical physical and human infrastructure, including that of partnered nations. Additionally, counter-SOF kinetic targeting would be an important part of protecting the friendly-force rear area.

Lastly, internal Russian rivalry among competing clans suggests that SSO activity may not always be nested within larger Russian aims. An imperfect unity of effort or seeming contradiction of Russian foreign policy may naturally occur as a result of competing internal interests as well as the Russian view of simultaneous competition and cooperation. The Russian

SSO belongs firmly to that tradition. As such, the primary implication of this occasionally mixed signal is twofold. First, it requires a dedicated effort to maintain a discreet line of communication with Russian leadership to clarify activities, though this must not come at the expense of a unified resolve to resist belligerent acts. Extending from this communication is a decision on whether to respond to a particular SSO act or choose to accept it as either an anomaly or an acceptable activity. The primary risk of such a decision is that Russia is expert at manipulating confusion to weaken its opponent's resolve and dilute a response.

In sum, the implications of the Russian KSO endorse many of the same activities that Gerasimov accused the West of conducting in the first place. Only now, Russia is much better prepared to respond in kind. This does not mean that the Western approach has been invalidated. On the contrary, it must be reinforced. Efforts to counter SSO will require sustained cognitive, social and physical responses to guarantee access and influence to vulnerable populations and to resist SSO operations across the globe.

Conclusion

The purpose of this monograph was to determine how the establishment of the Russian Special Operations Command affected the approach to special operations. How did the Russian approach to special operations evolve as it began to establish its Special Operations Forces as a force distinct from its existing special purpose soldiers? Though Russia has long maintained some form of organization for special operations, the creation of a separate SOF force with its own command signals a self-identified need to resolve a previously deficient capability. Moreover, the new command intimates a respect for the contemporary utility of special operations and, more broadly, a theory for Special Operations Forces (SOF). This theory has been inferred from the campaigns in Georgia and in Ukraine.

The Russian perception of threats within the context of their domestic politics, economic limitations and demography all led them to enact a campaign of military reform. Russia maintains

an interest in regional hegemony and a buffer zone on its borders. These interests are filtered through a domestic political scene characterized by competing political clans, including the security services. Moreover, reform remained constrained by demographic trends and economic vulnerability. These characteristics molded the development of KSO as an indirect way to pursue Russia's interests economically while appreciating the bureaucratic realities of domestic politics.

The campaign of military reform more broadly addressed newfound threats and challenges particularly after the Russian War in Georgia in 2008. As a result of the reforms, Russia's Armed Forces became a force capable of expeditionary offensive operations against peer adversaries. Forces have become more capable across the spectrum of conflict by focusing on operational mobility, the incorporation of enabling assets, and an improved reconnaissance capability. Concurrent to improvements in conventional capability, acknowledging the gaps therein, Russia acknowledged the need to develop better proficiency with special operations.

The creation of the Russian KSO addresses the gaps in conventional operations, particularly after the Georgian War in 2008. Russian SSO improved on Russia's historical experience with special operations by creating a force accountable to the military and capable of operating independently, covertly or in support of conventional operations. Unlike its Spetsnaz cousin, the SSO enables military options at the level of the Russian national command authority. Russian SSO may be used as a shaping force in a covert or UW campaign as in Crimea in 2014, or as a supplement to more conventional operations. The use of SOF, or lack thereof, in these campaigns helps explain how the Russian approach to special operations evolved during the reforms.

Thus, we are able to deduce the purpose for which Russia established its Special Operations Command. Though improving Russia's indirect approach beyond its borders appears to be central to the creation of the KSO, it does not alone explain the existence of the KSO. The theory of Russian SSO may be characterized as an emulation of the West towards an elite expeditionary force that reduces attribution to the Russian government. However, it also may be

characterized as a means for applying indirect methods as an economy of force element that seeks strategic effects for minimal resources. Additionally, it must be appreciated as a supplement to conventional operations, and even more broadly, as a particular means within the Russian approach to the holistic use of indirect and asymmetric methods. Lastly, KSO must be seen as a product of Russia's internal domestic political competition among the security services. Through that lens, KSO enables a parallel military capability that has previously resided in non-military special operations elements.

Russia's improved capability for SSO expeditionary operations below the threshold that invites a conventional response recommends a sustained effort to counter Russian influence. Sustained counter-Russian efforts must seek the same kind of cognitive, social and physical access and influence that Russia pursues with its SSO. They also must now allocate resources to countering SSO. Even so, the KSO, despite its youth, will likely remain difficult to counter, rooted as it is in the modern Russian approach to competition short of conflict.

Appendix 1: Key Definitions Relevant to Special Operations

Some of the most important terms for understanding Special Operations are described here by their definition within American doctrine. There is risk in mistaking Russian notions by applying the American military definition. Nevertheless, these definitions will be modified where appropriate to account for differing Russian conceptions.

Direct Action. Direct action entails short-duration strikes and other small-scale offensive actions conducted with specialized military capabilities to seize, destroy, capture, exploit, recover, or damage designated targets in hostile, denied, or diplomatically and/or politically sensitive environments. (JP 3-05, x)

Hybrid Warfare – the use of political, social, criminal, and other non-kinetic means employed to overcome military limitations. (US Army, *Threat Tactics Report: Russia Version 1.1*, 1).

Irregular Warfare - A violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant population(s). (JP 1, x)

Special Operations - Operations requiring unique modes of employment, tactical techniques, equipment and training often conducted in hostile, denied, or politically sensitive environments and characterized by one or more of the following: time sensitive, clandestine, low visibility, conducted with and/or through indigenous forces, requiring regional expertise, and/or a high degree of risk (JP 3-05, ix)

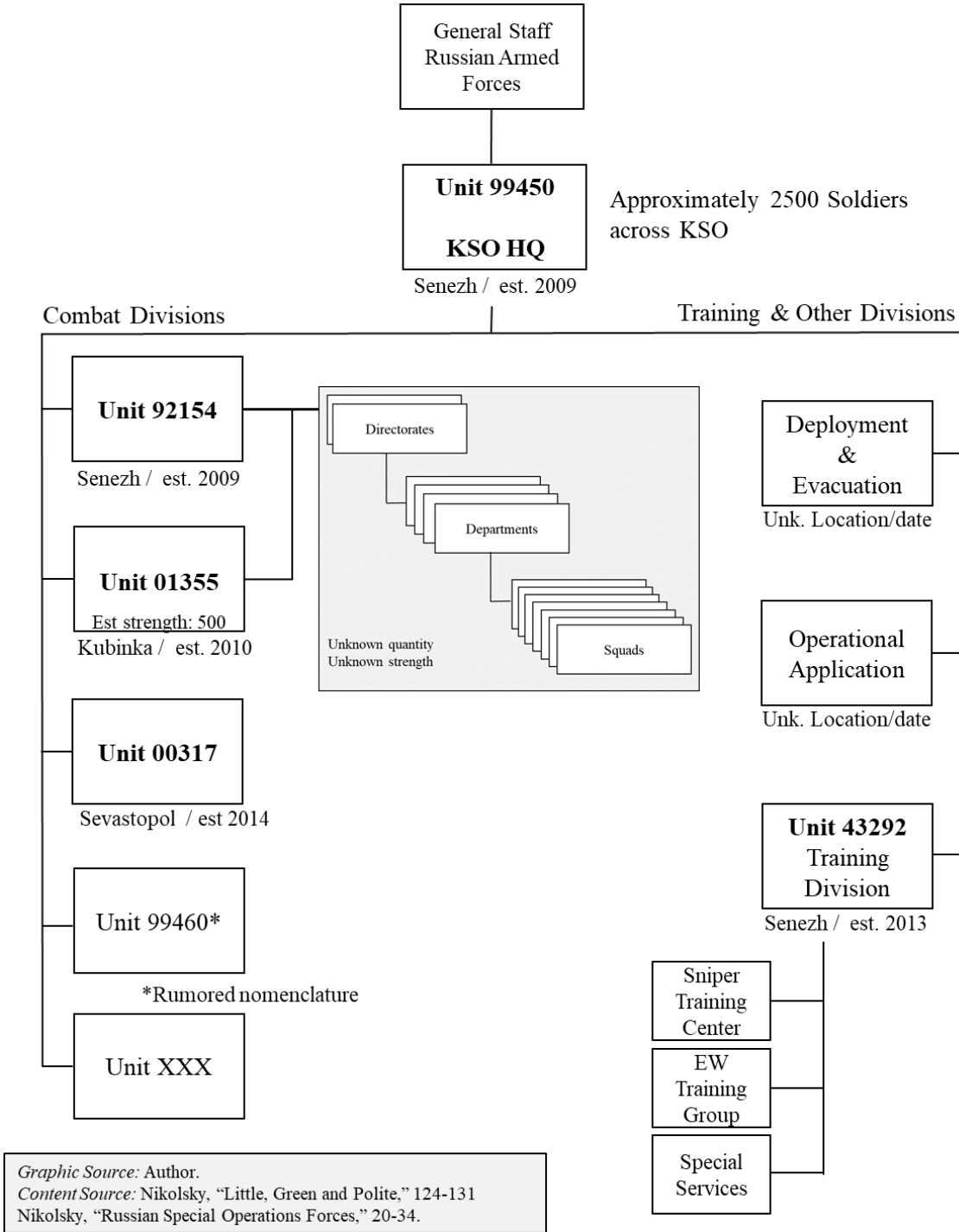
Special Operations Forces – term used generally to denote elements of various sizes that perform special operations. Used in the Russian sense, it refers exclusively to soldiers assigned to the Russian Special Operations Command.

Special Reconnaissance. Special reconnaissance entails reconnaissance and surveillance actions normally conducted in a clandestine or covert manner to collect or verify information of strategic or operational significance, employing military capabilities not normally found in conventional forces. (JP 3-05, x) Unlike the American definition, the Russians include Direct Action as a feature of Special Reconnaissance.

Spetsnaz – *Voyska spetsialnovo naznacheniya*, literally Troops of a Special Purpose. Spetsnaz serves as an umbrella term that includes elite soldiers across the security services. Their mandates and organization range from elite police elements to elite light infantry to genuine special operations elements. Additionally, other elements maintain a “special” designation that does not necessarily indicate an affiliation with Special Operations. Forces of special purpose called OSNAZ, *sily osobogo naznachenia*, are technical intelligence gatherers subordinate to GRU. Some special units – *spetsialnye* – denote units such as engineers and CBRN elements that facilitate command and control or logistics. (Ramm, 3-4)

Unconventional Warfare - Activities conducted to enable a resistance movement or insurgency to coerce, disrupt, or overthrow a government or occupying power by operating through or with an underground, auxiliary, and guerrilla force in a denied area. (JP 3-05)

Appendix 2: Suspected Task Organization of KSO



Graphic Source: Author.
Content Source: Nikolsky, "Little, Green and Polite," 124-131
 Nikolsky, "Russian Special Operations Forces," 20-34.

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