



**NAVAL  
POSTGRADUATE  
SCHOOL**

**MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA**

**THESIS**

**HOW THE BEAR HUNTS GUERILLAS: THE  
EVOLUTION OF RUSSIAN COUNTER-IRREGULAR  
WARFARE FROM 1994 TO PRESENT**

by

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December 2021

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<b>REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE</b>			<i>Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188</i>
Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instruction, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302, and to the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reduction Project (0704-0188) Washington, DC 20503.			
<b>1. AGENCY USE ONLY (Leave blank)</b>	<b>2. REPORT DATE</b> December 2021	<b>3. REPORT TYPE AND DATES COVERED</b> Master's thesis	
<b>4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE</b> HOW THE BEAR HUNTS GUERILLAS: THE EVOLUTION OF RUSSIAN COUNTER-IRREGULAR WARFARE FROM 1994 TO PRESENT		<b>5. FUNDING NUMBERS</b>	
<b>6. AUTHOR(S)</b> Benjamin A. Arbitter and Kurt A. Carlson			
<b>7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b> Naval Postgraduate School Monterey, CA 93943-5000		<b>8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER</b>	
<b>9. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b> N/A		<b>10. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY REPORT NUMBER</b>	
<b>11. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES</b> The views expressed in this thesis are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of Defense or the U.S. Government.			
<b>12a. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT</b> Approved for public release. Distribution is unlimited.		<b>12b. DISTRIBUTION CODE</b> A	
<b>13. ABSTRACT (maximum 200 words)</b>  Since the 2014 invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces, U.S. policymakers and military professionals have dedicated significant attention to countering Russian offensive irregular warfare and political warfare threats. However, just as Russia has modernized its offensive irregular capabilities, it has also made significant strides in combatting asymmetric threats. Russia's 2015 intervention in Syria demonstrated this advancement, as Russian-led Syrian forces successfully battled U.S.-backed groups and the Islamic State. If U.S. Special Forces (USSF) and their allies intend to challenge near-peer adversaries abroad, then it is time to study the threat posed by a modern counter-irregular warfare (CIW) campaign. This study seeks to address the transformation of Russian CIW doctrine and methods from the Russian Federation's invasion of Chechnya in 1994 up through its current activities in the North Caucasus, the Middle East, and beyond. By identifying key principles and capabilities from across these case studies, this project aims to develop an improved understanding of the threat USSF and their partners would face executing unconventional warfare (UW) against Russia or its proxies. Such an understanding would inform threat-based training scenarios and enhance the Special Forces regiment's understanding of how Green Berets might execute UW against a peer adversary.			
<b>14. SUBJECT TERMS</b> Russia, counterinsurgency, COIN, irregular warfare, Chechnya, Syria, modernization, unconventional warfare, UW, U.S. Special Forces, USSF		<b>15. NUMBER OF PAGES</b> 141	<b>16. PRICE CODE</b>
<b>17. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF REPORT</b> Unclassified	<b>18. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF THIS PAGE</b> Unclassified	<b>19. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF ABSTRACT</b> Unclassified	<b>20. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT</b> UU

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COUNTER-IRREGULAR WARFARE FROM 1994 TO PRESENT**

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

**MASTER OF SCIENCE IN DEFENSE ANALYSIS  
(IRREGULAR WARFARE)**

from the

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## **ABSTRACT**

Since the 2014 invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces, U.S. policymakers and military professionals have dedicated significant attention to countering Russian offensive irregular warfare and political warfare threats. However, just as Russia has modernized its offensive irregular capabilities, it has also made significant strides in combatting asymmetric threats. Russia's 2015 intervention in Syria demonstrated this advancement, as Russian-led Syrian forces successfully battled U.S.-backed groups and the Islamic State. If U.S. Special Forces (USSF) and their allies intend to challenge near-peer adversaries abroad, then it is time to study the threat posed by a modern counter-irregular warfare (CIW) campaign. This study seeks to address the transformation of Russian CIW doctrine and methods from the Russian Federation's invasion of Chechnya in 1994 up through its current activities in the North Caucasus, the Middle East, and beyond. By identifying key principles and capabilities from across these case studies, this project aims to develop an improved understanding of the threat USSF and their partners would face executing unconventional warfare (UW) against Russia or its proxies. Such an understanding would inform threat-based training scenarios and enhance the Special Forces regiment's understanding of how Green Berets might execute UW against a peer adversary.

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ADA	Air Defense Artillery
ATAK	Android Team Awareness Kit
AWACS	Airborne Warning and Control System
C2	Command and Control
CAR	Central African Republic
CAS	Close Air Support
CCA	Close Combat Attack [aviation]
CSAR	Combat Search and Rescue
CUAS	Counter-Unmanned Aerial Systems
CIW	Counter-Irregular Warfare
COIN	Counter-Insurgency
DA	Direct Action
DOD	Department of Defense
DIME	Diplomatic, Informational, Military, Economic
EW	Electronic Warfare
FID	Foreign Internal Defense
FSK	<i>Federalnaya Sluzhba Kontrrazvedki</i> (Federal Counterintelligence Service)
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
IO	Information Operations
ISR	Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance
JDAM	Joint Direct Attack Munition
KGB	<i>Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti</i> (Committee for State Security)
LNA	Libyan National Army
MFF	Military Free Fall
MoD	Ministry of Defense
MVD	<i>Ministerstvo Vnutrenich Dyel</i> (Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs)
OBE	Order of the British Empire
PGK	precision guidance kit (artillery)

PGM	precision guided munition
PMC	private military company
RF	Russian Federation
SAA	Syrian Arab Army
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
SR	Special Reconnaissance
SOF	Special Operations Forces
SSO	<i>Sily Spetsial'nykh Operatsiy</i> (Russian Special Operations Forces)
UAV	Unmanned Aerial Vehicle
U.S.	United States
USD	United States Dollar
USAFRICOM	United States Africa Command
USCENTCOM	United States Central Command
USEUCOM	United States European Command
USSF	United States Special Forces
USSOCOM	United States Special Operations Command
UW	Unconventional Warfare
VVS	<i>Voенno-vozdushnoye Sili</i> (Russian Air Force)



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to offer our sincere thanks to the members of our advisory team: Dr. Kalev Sepp, for your guidance as we struggled to meld ideas from different classes into a coherent study; Dr. Tommy Jamison, for transforming endless chapter iterations into concise and polished academic prose; and Dr. Aleksander Matovski, for your expertise and insight on the Russian way of war. Much appreciation also to our peers who provided sounding boards, gave criticism, read over chapters, and helped us grow our ideas on the topic.

**Ben:** No part of this adventure would be possible without the support of my wife, Brittany. Her grace and patience have provided the foundation for a phenomenal experience here at NPS. To our children, thank you for always being ready to blow off some steam at the playground with your Dad and never holding a grudge when I couldn't join in the fun.

**Kurt:** First and foremost, thank you to my wife, Andrea, for listening to many excited rants about newfound sources, the ups and downs of dead ends in research, and for consistently supporting me while at NPS. To the kids, thank you for being understanding when I had to buckle down and write, and thank you for busting into the office when you knew it was time for a break.

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Since the 2014 invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces, U.S. policymakers and military professionals have dedicated significant attention to countering Russian offensive irregular warfare and political warfare threats. However, just as Russia has modernized its offensive irregular capabilities, it has also made significant strides in combatting asymmetric threats. Russia's 2015 intervention in Syria demonstrated this advancement, as Russian-led Syrian forces successfully battled U.S.-backed groups and the Islamic State. If U.S. Special Forces (USSF) and their allies intend to challenge near-peer adversaries abroad, then it is time to study the threat posed by a modern counter-irregular warfare (CIW) campaign.

As the United States faces a resurgent Russia with a line of contact stretching from the Baltics to the Caucasus as well as partners committed to resistance, the USSF community is sorely lacking a detailed understanding of Russian CIW. Unconventional warfare (UW) remains the cornerstone of USSF's capabilities, yet many of the current UW paradigms still rely heavily on examples from World War II, or (when updated) from Afghanistan—two scenarios that fail to capture the evolutionary changes in technology and a near-peer threat respectively.

This study seeks to address the transformation of Russian CIW doctrine and methods from the Russian Federation's invasion of Chechnya in 1994 up through its current activities in the North Caucasus, the Middle East, and beyond. By identifying key principles and capabilities from across these case studies, this project aims to develop an improved understanding of the threat USSF and their partners would face executing UW against Russia or its proxies. Such an understanding would inform threat-based training scenarios and enhance the Special Forces regiment's understanding of how Green Berets might execute UW against a peer adversary.

### **A. RESEARCH QUESTION**

This research seeks to answer the primary question: How has Russian Counter-Irregular Warfare changed in the last 25 years, and what impact will this have on U.S.

Special Operations Forces (SOF) and their partners operating in denied areas under Russian control?

This thesis deliberately uses the term “Counter-Irregular Warfare” as an umbrella term to capture multiple types of military operations (Counter-Insurgency, Foreign Internal Defense, Counter-Terrorism) executed by Russian forces against insurgents. Furthermore, the Russian tradition of Counter-Insurgency (COIN) diverges starkly from traditional Western concepts. Whereas Western COIN practitioners rely on an academic lineage built around a whole of government response to insurgency, Russian approaches are focused on targeting and destroying guerilla forces. The use of COIN as an umbrella term for such activities would be inaccurate and potentially misleading. This term is not intended to replace COIN in the Western lexicon, but to more accurately describe Russian approaches and methodology.

## **B. RESEARCH APPROACH**

This thesis analyzes historical case studies and key pivot points to trace Russian CIW’s evolution from 1994 to 2020. This evolution has enabled the “stumbling bear” of Afghanistan to emerge in recent years as a potent CIW practitioner, successfully intervening in Syria to tip the balance of power in favor of the Assad regime. At its core, this project seeks to understand both the continuities and shifts that have allowed Russia to enter the next decade with a proficient CIW force capable of executing expeditionary operations to support its partners.

To trace these continuities and shifts, the subsequent chapters explore historical Russian CIW through the themes of changes in CIW force composition, fires, and integration of technology. Force composition provides an opportunity to analyze the changing structure as the Russian CIW forces transformed from conscripted divisions to modular brigades complete with integrated SOF and enablers. Tracing the evolution of the Russian use of fires, both through the Russian air force and artillery, highlights the continued reliance on fires as a coercive blunt instrument while technological improvements increasingly allow for precision targeting. Finally, the integration of

technology at the tactical level demonstrates the increasingly sophisticated tools available to maneuver forces on the ground.

The three themes are further described as outputs of Russian strategic culture in Chapter III. The subsequent chapters analyze changes in each of these categories across three case studies and two key pivot points. The First Chechen War (1994-96), Second Chechen War (1999-2009), and Russian intervention in Syria (2015-present) comprise the three case studies. This work also analyzes the implications of Russian military reforms since 2008 and of Moscow exporting their CIW forces and methods following their success in Syria as key pivot points in this evolution.

These specific case studies and areas of emphasis were selected based on their relevance to understanding the evolution's scale, and the potential impact of these changes at the operational level. Russia has a robust history of CIW, beginning with the Yermolov era in Chechnya (1816). The strategic culture chapter provides a summary of the origins of this history, while briefly exploring the Soviet Union's occupation of Afghanistan as an example of its legacy. The First and Second Chechen Wars provide us two cases with the same opponents, same region, and strikingly different results. The Second Chechen War (in its later period) additionally highlights emerging themes of Russian forces when executing stability operations. Although it does not neatly fit the Western COIN model, Syria falls firmly in the realm of CIW due to Russia's use of SOF and conventional forces to hunt rebel groups arrayed against Bashar al Assad. Additionally, Syria provides the most current example of modern Russian CIW and incorporates its latest technological advances and subsequent doctrinal adaptations. While research on additional case studies may provide added nuance, the selected examples combined with an analysis of Russian modernization reforms and Russia's attempts to export this model provide ample evidence to the scale of Russia's progress in this arena.

CIW as defined in this work refers to the combating of irregular threats. As such, a noticeable absence from the selection of case studies is the Russian incursion into Crimea and subsequent support to the breakaway states in the Donbas. Whereas in the selected case studies Russian forces are executing CIW against irregular opponents, in Ukraine Russian

forces are executing an irregular war against a uniformed force representing the Ukrainian state.

### C. THESIS SUMMARY

Chapter III focuses on Russian strategic culture towards CIW culminating in the Soviet-Afghan War. Up to this point, the Russian approach to CIW remained largely undefeated, and the Russians had never truly adapted their practices dating back to the Yermolov era.<sup>1</sup> Geographic and historic factors have influenced a distinct Russian strategic culture, with enduring themes that can be traced across each of this thesis' analytical themes: Force composition, fires incorporation, and technological integration.

Chapter IV addresses the First Chechen War. This conflict marks the first significant CIW operation executed by the Russian Federation following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Universally regarded as a failure, this period serves as the beginning of a shift away from the traditional Russian CIW approach towards something new. Additionally, approaching the First and Second Chechen wars as two independent case studies allows for a direct comparison between the Russian approach to two separate conflicts in the same geographic region against a nearly identical foe separated by only five years. However, in that short time, the Russian approach to fighting the same enemy improved significantly.

Chapter V discusses the Second Chechen War up to the end of active stability operations in 2008. This chapter focuses on how the Russian army managed to decisively win the second conflict without significant reforms by changing how it engaged the problem. The shift in the utilization of local partner forces (*kadirovtsi*, “Chechenization”) and the stylistic change in brutality against the local populace are assessed as a byproduct of a pivot in the Russian CIW force composition. Additionally, the chapter analyzes the operational impacts of pivoting to partner forces/local strongmen in CIW—namely, the

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<sup>1</sup> Yuri Zhukov, “Counterinsurgency in a Non- Democratic State: The Russian Example,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency*, ed. Paul B. Rich and Isabelle Duyvesteyn (Routledge, 2012), 293–307, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203132609-32>.

ability to reduce Russian casualties while distancing itself from some of the brutality executed by its proxies.

Chapter VI addresses modernization efforts following the 2008 Georgian War. One cannot place the notable shifts in the Russian CIW approach without the context of the subsequent reforms of the Russian military. This section includes two halves—the first focused on the shortcomings highlighted during the conflict, and the second on the structural and technological changes to the Russian military to address these failures. Emphasis is placed on the impact of *kontraktniki* (professional contract soldiers) versus *prizivniki* (yearling, recruit, or draftee) and reduction of the *dedovshina* (“grandfathering,” brutal hazing of recruits). Additionally, this chapter highlights the transition to modular brigade formations and the focused efforts to integrate technology such as unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and precision fires targeting.

Chapter VII covers the Russian intervention in Syria, specifically Russian forces assistance to Bashar Al Assad’s CIW campaign against the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and other breakaway factions. Due to the paucity of modern Russian CIW cases, this case study uniquely captures how the Russians have used the lessons learned from the Russo-Georgian War and incorporated them into CIW. Topics addressed include their use of precision fires, integration of aviation support, development of tailored CIW enablers, and a changing role for SOF.

Chapter VIII focuses on the Russian Federation’s (RF) ability and propensity to export this model. Using the Syria case study as a foundation, it addresses examples of the RF exporting these CIW capabilities to foreign partners such as Mozambique, Libya, and Central African Republic. Themes that emerge in this chapter include the use of private military companies (PMCs) to augment advisory packages, willingness to conduct “advise, assist, accompany” operations at the battalion level, integration of Russian assets with indigenous forces, and the use of SOF as connective tissue with partners.

Chapters IX and X discuss the findings and implications of this research. Chapter IX analyzes the research findings across the three themes discussed throughout the thesis: 1. Force composition, 2. Joint Fires, and 3. Technological integration at the tactical level.

This thesis argues that the Russian military has undergone drastic changes in its CIW capabilities, while retaining a distinct Russian approach to defeating irregular threats.

Chapter X addresses the implications of these findings for policy makers, USSF, and future research. At the policy level, the chapter discusses both the challenges and opportunities available to the U.S. considering Russia's evolved CIW capability. Pertaining to USSF, the chapter discusses some of the key takeaways for tactical and operational leaders preparing for potential conflict against Russia or a Russia -backed adversary.



## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. ISLANDS OF APPLICABLE LITERATURE

While Western academics and military professionals have recognized and written extensively about the threat posed by advances in Russian irregular warfare capabilities, most of this attention has focused on countering Russian irregular warfare, e.g., “Hybrid Warfare.”<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, advances in Russian military organization and thought have had an equally significant impact on their counter-irregular warfare capabilities, e.g., counterterrorism, and foreign internal defense. This lack of study is an essential gap in military literature given the USSF mission of executing Unconventional Warfare (UW) and the strategic focus to prepare to do so against Russian or Chinese forces or proxies. Critical periods and topics within the existing literature include Russian strategic culture, the First Chechen War (1994-1996), the Second Chechen War (1999-2009), Russian modernization following the 2008 Georgian War, and Russia’s ongoing intervention in Syria (2015-present).

### B. RUSSIAN STRATEGIC CULTURE

Modern Russian CIW experiences have been shaped by a long history of countering irregular threats, rebellions, and insurgencies. These forces in turn left their imprint on Russian strategic culture as it pertains towards CIW. Strategic culture, defined as “that body of broadly shared, powerfully influential, and especially enduring attitudes, perceptions, dispositions, and reflexes that shape behavior and policy,” continues to influence Russian operations today.<sup>3</sup> An understanding of the resulting strategic culture serves as a baseline for any discussion on the evolution of modern CIW. The Russian experience of CIW is best understood from the perspective of an expansionist, continental

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<sup>2</sup> Christopher Chivvis, Understanding Russian “Hybrid Warfare”: And What Can Be Done About It (RAND Corporation, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.7249/CT468>; Alexander Lanoszka, “Russian Hybrid Warfare and Extended Deterrence in Eastern Europe,” *International Affairs* 92 (January 1, 2016): 175–95, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12509>.

<sup>3</sup> Fritz Ermarth. *Russia’s Strategic Culture: Past, Present, and.....In Transition?* DTRA01-03-D-0017. (Reston, VA: Defense Threat Reduction Agency, 2006) <https://irp.fas.org/agency/dod/dtra/russia.pdf>.

power. George Kennan, when Ambassador to the Soviet Union, penned the “Long Telegram” of 1946, which provides a thoughtful description of the role of history and geography in shaping Russian perceptions of security, defense, and expansion.<sup>4</sup> Comparisons to American expansionism rely heavily on Robert Utley’s “The Contribution of the Frontier to the American Military Tradition,” and Russell Weigley’s *The American Way of War* and *Annihilation of a People*.<sup>5</sup> These pieces address the nature of expanding frontiers for a continental power in the late 1800s (the United States), and describe the nature of fighting disparate indigenous peoples as part of a steady expansionist drive. Their perspective is significant in the discussion of Russian CIW by providing insights on similar American approaches, and examples for contrast.

A substantial body of literature addresses the impacts of Russian Strategic Culture writ large, but not specific to CIW. In his 2013 book *Hard Diplomacy and Soft Coercion*, Russian expert James Sherr (OBE) traces applicable cultural themes that have impacted Russian strategic culture through the Tsarist, Soviet, and post-Soviet eras. He argues that Russian actions abroad are a combination of strategy (albeit often discordant), inventiveness (often highly effective), and habit, driven across all three periods by cultural influences.<sup>6</sup> Sherr’s description of Tsarist and Soviet *realpolitik* when assessing threats is of particular use to understanding the logical conclusion of Russian strategic culture towards CIW.

Another important component of the applicable literature is Polish academic Anna Antczak’s “Russia’s Strategic Culture: A Prisoner of Imperial History.”<sup>7</sup> Tying together previous works from experts in the field, Antczak deftly weaves the historic origins of Russian strategic culture, highlighting the need for expansionism and use of a messianic

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<sup>4</sup> George Kennan, “George Kennan’s ‘Long Telegram’” (Wilson Center Digital Archive, 1946).

<sup>5</sup> Robert Utley, “The Contribution of the Frontier to the American Military Tradition,” *United States Air Force Academy 7th Military History Symposium Proceedings*, 1976; Russell Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy*. (Indiana University Press, 1973).

<sup>6</sup> James Sherr, *Hard Diplomacy and Soft Coercion: Russia’s Influence Abroad* (London: Brookings Institution Press, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> Anna Antczak, “Russia’s Strategic Culture: Prisoner of Imperial History?,” *Athenaeum Polskie Studia Politologiczne* 60, no. 4 (December 31, 2018): 223–42, <https://doi.org/10.15804/athena.2018.60.13>.

perception of the state. She then filters the origins of strategic culture through the modern pragmatist stance of Russian foreign policy. Antczak describes Russian culture as based on an “extraordinary mixture of historical, ideological, geopolitical, and deeply emotional factors.”<sup>8</sup> Most pertinent among them for CIW, she describes expansionism tied to messianic belief in the state (Russia as “a chosen people”), sentimentalism and nationalism backed by the Orthodox church, and authoritarian precedence given to the armed forces.<sup>9</sup> This nuance and perspective is valuable when addressing the causative nature of Russian strategic culture.

Alongside these works on strategic culture of continental powers and Russian strategic culture writ large is a body of works focused on Russian experiences in the Caucasus and Central Asia. The existing literature on the early Caucasian CIW campaigns and the Soviet-Afghan War provide the examples to distill how Russian strategic culture manifests in CIW operations. Charles King’s *The Ghost of Freedom* is a comprehensive study of Russia’s relationship with the Caucasus.<sup>10</sup> In it, King addresses both the North Caucasus (Cherkassy, North Ossetia, Ingushetia, Dagestan, and Chechnya) and the South Caucasus (Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan) starting in the early 1800s up through to the present. Although not specifically a study on Strategic Culture or CIW, King’s works add valuable context and a historical perspective that sets conditions for the subsequent literature on the Soviet-Afghan War.

The Soviet experience in Afghanistan is an important inflection point for any discussion on the evolution of modern Russian CIW. Six years after the end of the Vietnam War and running through both of Ronald Reagan’s terms in office, military and academic circles viewed this conflict as representative of flaws in Soviet counterinsurgency doctrine. Later, the fall of the USSR enabled unprecedented access to primary sources from within the Soviet Union. From this period (early 1990s), the cornerstones of the discussion on Russian CIW in Afghanistan emerged in Western literature.

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<sup>8</sup> Antczak, 239.

<sup>9</sup> Antczak, 239.

<sup>10</sup> Charles King, *The Ghost of Freedom: A History of the Caucasus* (UK: Oxford University Press, 2008).

Lester Grau's seminal work, *The Bear Went Over the Mountain*, provides a direct translation of Russian lessons learned as captured by the Russian General Staff after the war. Told in the form of forty-nine firsthand accounts of tactical engagements by Soviet military commanders, the book provides a detailed report of Soviet operations in Afghanistan. Augmented by both the General Staff and Grau's commentary, these narratives illustrate why the Soviet military struggled to secure its grip on Afghanistan, despite their historic successes elsewhere.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to illuminating the Soviet perspective of the conflict, Grau, in collaboration with Ali Ahmad Jalali, published a companion piece, *The Other Side of the Mountain*. This second volume mirrors *The Bear Went Over the Mountain's* structure but draws on interviews with Afghan *mujahedeen* for its vignettes.<sup>12</sup> When combined, these two works provide a detailed account of tactical operations from both sides of the conflict and astute observations into the operational-level trends demonstrated by the Russians and observed by their Afghan opponents.

Specific themes emerge from Grau's work, which serve as a baseline for understanding Russian CIW moving forward. Whereas the General Staff's commentary is (as expected) stilted by the culture of conformity standard in the Soviet Union, Grau captures some trends pertaining to Russian tactics, equipment, force structure, morale, and overarching attitudes. He depicts a Soviet army forced to adapt its tactics, testing new equipment, executing *ad hoc* force restructuring upon arrival, manned by conscripts with low morale, and led by officers who feared retribution.<sup>13</sup> More importantly, Grau hints at the shocking savagery of Russian operational trends in action—"scorched earth" tactics to restrict insurgent access to food and shelter, indiscriminate savagery against civilians, and ineffective use of Afghan forces as allies.<sup>14</sup> Grau's depiction of Russian CIW aligns with

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<sup>11</sup> Lester Grau, ed., *The Bear Went Over the Mountain: Soviet Combat Tactics in Afghanistan* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 1996).

<sup>12</sup> Ali Ahmad Jalali and Lester Grau, *The Other Side of the Mountain: Mujahideen Tactics in the Soviet-Afghan War*, 1995, <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a376862.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Grau, *The Bear Went Over the Mountain: Soviet Combat Tactics in Afghanistan*.

<sup>14</sup> Grau, 203–208.

the broader pattern seen in works on the 19th century campaigns in the Caucasus, such as Charles King's *Ghost of Freedom*.

While Grau and Jalali provide limited operational analysis, Scott McMichael distills numerous Soviet and Western sources into a concise breakdown of Soviet military performance in *Stumbling Bear*. McMichael evaluates the progression of the war by phase, discussing the success and failures of the Soviet military by warfighting function. After explaining the Soviet (and later Russian) distaste for specific counterinsurgency doctrine, McMichael identifies shortcomings in the Russian force structure and tactics and emphasizes the contemporary (ca. 1990) debate within the Russian military regarding the potential to reform and learn from their failures in Afghanistan.<sup>15</sup>

These works and many other publications from the period following the fall of the Soviet Union provide a detailed and thoughtful discussion of the Russian military's successes and failures in the conflict. Most importantly, they describe a baseline reference point of Soviet CIW in detail and mark the beginning of Russian realization that its approach to CIW was flawed.

### C. THE WARS IN THE CAUCASUS

Compared to the Soviet experience in Afghanistan, Russian counterinsurgency efforts in Chechnya and the North Caucasus are less systematically documented. Whereas the cornerstone works on Afghanistan are primarily qualitative analyses from a practitioner's lens, the First and Second Chechen Wars (1994-1996 and 2000–2009 respectively) received extensive attention from practitioners, academics, and journalists.<sup>16</sup> The literature on Chechnya identifies three distinct epochs in the conflict—the First

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<sup>15</sup> Scott McMichael, *Stumbling Bear: Soviet Military Performance in Afghanistan* (London: Brassey's (UK), 1991).

<sup>16</sup> Krystel von Kumberg, "Russian Counterinsurgency Doctrine During The Second Chechen War 1999–2009," *Georgetown Security Studies Review*, March 6, 2020, <https://georgetownsecuritystudiesreview.org/2020/03/06/russian-counterinsurgency-doctrine-during-the-second-chechen-war-1999-2009/>; Andrew Higgins, "The War That Continues to Shape Russia, 25 Years Later," *The New York Times*, December 10, 2019, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/10/world/europe/photos-chechen-war-russia.html>; Jason Lyall, "Are Coethnics More Effective Counterinsurgents? Evidence from the Second Chechen War," *The American Political Science Review* 104, no. 1 (2010): 1–20.

Chechen War, the Second Chechen War (up to the fall of Grozny), and the period of “Chechenization” or “Kadyrovisation” in the latter years of the Second Chechen War.

Filling much the same role as Grau’s two works, in *The Fangs of The Wolf*, Dodge Billingsley provides tactical and operational level insights from interviews with Chechen fighters and commanders who fought in the conflict from 1994–2009.<sup>17</sup> Using a high volume of vignettes to portray the broader picture, Billingsley recounts dozens of engagements between the Chechen fighters and the Russian counterinsurgents. The accounts include diagrams of the terrain and forces, as well as Billingsley’s commentary on the conduct of both sides.

Billingsley’s fundamental argument is that the Russians significantly adapted their approach to the Second Chechen War based on their shortcomings in the previous conflict.<sup>18</sup> Billingsley posits that while Russian formations suffered from inadequate training and logistics in the First Chechen War, they returned with significantly better trained and better-supplied forces in the Second. Tactically, Russian forces in the Second Chechen War relied heavily on air attacks and indirect fires to reduce Chechen positions in the urban areas previously used as strongholds. However, Billingsley remains silent on the Russian policy of Chechenization. Additionally, despite the book’s claim of covering the conflict through 2009, nearly all the events depicted occurred before 2001, which may explain this absence.

Olga Olikier’s *Russia’s Chechen Wars*, published by RAND Corporation, provides the most comprehensive operational history of the Chechen Wars.<sup>19</sup> While her work includes vignettes to provide granularity to the reader, her focus remains firmly at the operational level, discussing the significant strengths and failures of both sides of the conflict and the critical changes between the two wars. She compares the Russian performance over time through the lens of “evolving approaches to urban combat.” While

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<sup>17</sup> Dodge Billingsley, *The Fangs of the Lone Wolf: Chechen Tactics in the Russian-Chechen Wars 1994–2009* (Solihull (UK): Helion & Company, Ltd, 2013).

<sup>18</sup> Billingsley.

<sup>19</sup> Olga Olikier, *Russia’s Chechen Wars 1994–2000: Lessons from Urban Combat* (Santa Monica, Calif: RAND Corporation, 2001), 5, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/mr1289a>.

this lens results in a heavy focus on the multiple battles for Grozny over the broader campaigns, her work provides one of the best documented and organized accounts of the military struggle.

In addition to operational military histories, the Chechen Wars have also spurred significant academic discussion regarding the efficacy of the Russian approach in Chechnya compared to Western COIN. In *A Perfect Counterinsurgency*, Ratelle and Souleimanov argue that despite its high cost, “from a purely military perspective, Chechenization has been a momentous success.”<sup>20</sup> They base this assertion on the effectiveness of the *kadirovtsi* (ethnic Chechen forces loyal to pro-Russian strongman Ramzan Kadyrov). Unlike previous attempts by Russian forces, the *kadirovtsi* have expanded control beyond the urban areas and extended pro-Russian influence into the insurgents’ historic safe havens in the mountains. Furthermore, by turning Chechen society against itself in an internal struggle, Moscow has managed to deflect the preponderance of casualties and blame for atrocities upon the Chechens themselves.<sup>21</sup>

Despite Ratelle and Souleimanov’s upbeat assessment of Chechenization, many scholars contend that Russian successes in Chechnya remain fragile. While the threat of secession may have faded, the underlying issues that fueled the insurgency remain unanswered.<sup>22</sup> Kadyrov’s reign fits into the niche described by author Sean McFate as “neo-medievalism”—i.e., a temporarily successful relationship relying more on interpersonal relationships and fealty than a systematic resolution of security and governance issues.<sup>23</sup> Historian Charles King summarizes the sentiment that by outsourcing control to local proxies and emphasizing brute force over finesse, Chechnya will remain a

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<sup>20</sup> Jean-François Ratelle and Emil Aslan Souleimanov, “A Perfect Counterinsurgency? Making Sense of Moscow’s Policy of Chechenisation,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 68, no. 8 (September 13, 2016): 1287–1314, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2016.1230842>.

<sup>21</sup> Ratelle and Souleimanov.

<sup>22</sup> Kumberg, “Russian Counterinsurgency Doctrine During The Second Chechen War 1999–2009.”

<sup>23</sup> Sean McFate, *The Modern Mercenary: Private Armies and What They Mean for World Order* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

“troublesome, exotic appendage.”<sup>24</sup> Regardless of which camp one endorses, Russia’s empowerment of Kadyrov and his allies only further complicates any narrative of Russian success.<sup>25</sup>

In sum, the two Chechen Wars provide important and understudied benchmarks in the study of Russian CIW. Not only do they demonstrate pivot points in Russian CIW following Afghanistan, they also highlight the changes and deviations from the Afghan model moving into the most modern example—Syria.

#### D. THE SYRIAN CAMPAIGN

Immediately following the Russian annexation of Crimea, scholars and practitioners generated a surge in literature attempting to understand how Russia had accomplished such an audacious act. These writings included postmortem reports such as RAND’s *Lessons Learned from Russia’s Operations in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine* and United States Army Special Operations Command’s *Little Green Men: A Primer on Modern Unconventional Warfare*, while others focused on preventing such an action elsewhere on Russia’s periphery.<sup>26</sup> When Russia again surprised much of the international community by intervening to support the Assad regime in Syria the following year, the threat of a resurgent Russia appeared validated. Against this backdrop, Lester Grau published *The Russian Way of War*.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Charles King and Rajan Menon, “Prisoners of the Caucasus: Russia’s Invisible Civil War,” *Foreign Affairs* 89, no. 4 (2010): 20–34.

<sup>25</sup> Gordon Hahn, “The Jihadi Insurgency and the Russian Counterinsurgency in the North Caucasus,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 24 (January 1, 2008): 1–39, <https://doi.org/10.2747/1060-586X.24.1.1>.

<sup>26</sup> “United States Army Special Operations Command Little Green Men: A Primer of Modern Unconventional Warfare, Ukraine 2013–2014. (United States Army Special Operations Command, August, 2016).[https://www.jhuapl.edu/Content/documents/ARIS\\_LittleGreenMen.pdf](https://www.jhuapl.edu/Content/documents/ARIS_LittleGreenMen.pdf); Michael Kofman et al., *Lessons from Russia’s Operations in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine*, Research Report, RR-1498-A (Santa Monica, Calif: Rand Corporation, 2017); David A. Shlapak and Michael Johnson, “Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO’s Eastern Flank: Wargaming the Defense of the Baltics,” January 29, 2016, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1253.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1253.html); Ben Connable et al., *Russia’s Hostile Measures: Combating Russian Gray Zone Aggression Against NATO in the Contact, Blunt, and Surge Layers of Competition* (RAND Corporation, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.7249/RR2539>.

<sup>27</sup> Lester Grau and Charles Bartles, *The Russian Way of War: Force Structure, Tactics, and Modernization of the Russian Ground Forces*, n.d., <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/Hot%20Spots/Documents/Russia/2017-07-The-Russian-Way-of-War-Grau-Bartles.pdf>.



Grau describes the impact of modernization on the Russian army's force structure and tactics.<sup>28</sup> Predominately focused on conventional tactics for use against a peer threat, his work also provides insights into the underlying planning and employment theory guiding the Russian military. However, Grau includes no significant mention of Russian irregular warfare, much less how the Russian military adapts its force structure or tactics when fighting an irregular threat.

In contrast, the Foreign Policy Research Institute's *Russia's War in Syria* provides a much more comprehensive understanding of how the Russian military adapted its forces for its intervention abroad.<sup>29</sup> Through the study, one can discern common themes from Russia's counterinsurgency efforts in Chechnya—such as the indiscriminate use of shelling and bombing to reduce threats to their forces. However, the Russian military also incorporated newer tools such as a robust Private Military Company (PMC) presence and deploying entire division, brigade, and battalion staffs to embed with their Syrian partners.<sup>30</sup>

#### **E. METHOD: TRACKING THE EVOLUTION OF CIW**

Over the last seven years, the literature on Russian irregular warfare has experienced a renaissance—spurred by the 2014 occupation of Crimea and subsequent civil war in east Ukraine. Additionally, the Chechen Wars, the Syrian campaign, and multiple limited operations throughout Africa have provided case studies to academics and military practitioners, given the compelling similarities. Yet, no academic scholarship has analyzed Russian CIW evolution in relation to Russian modernization efforts, structural and technological reforms, and the implications for U.S. and Allied operations. Yuri Zhukov comes close in his explorations of Russian “COIN” and produces useful analysis of Russia's startling success rate at succeeding in suppressing insurgencies, but his focus

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<sup>28</sup> Grau and Bartles.

<sup>29</sup> Robert Hamilton, Chris Miller, and Aaron Stein, *Russia's War in Syria: Assessing Military Capabilities and Lessons Learned* (Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2020), <https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/russias-war-in-syria.pdf>.

<sup>30</sup> Hamilton, Miller, and Stein.

remains at the regime and national level.<sup>31</sup> Additionally, his analysis extends only to 2010, precisely when Russia was undergoing its massive military reforms following the Georgian War.

U.S. European Command (USEUCOM) bluntly states that “should deterrence fail, USEUCOM is prepared to fight alongside Allies and partners in *any* conflict” (emphasis added).<sup>32</sup> Given the continued primacy of USSF as DOD’s UW tool of choice, U.S. SOF should have a shared understanding of how the Russian CIW threat has evolved.<sup>33</sup> The last 20 years have highlighted a new Russian CIW model based in a low tolerance for friendly casualties and high tolerance for collateral damage but evolved in its application of smaller, more competent force packages equipped with cutting edge technology and relying more heavily on local partner forces. Russia has proven itself brutally effective at countering irregular threats and has begun experimenting with exporting this model abroad. To compete against such a threat, one should understand how and why the Russian military has evolved into such a competent CIW force.

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<sup>31</sup> Zhukov, “Counterinsurgency in a Non- Democratic State.”

<sup>32</sup> “Commander’s Priorities,” Eucom. Accessed February 8, 2021, <https://www.eucom.mil/organization/commanders-priorities>.

<sup>33</sup> “Unconventional Warfare Pocket Guide.” USASOC. 2016, [https://www.soc.mil/ARIS/books/pdf/Unconventional%20Warfare%20Pocket%20Guide\\_v1%200\\_Final\\_6%20April%202016.pdf](https://www.soc.mil/ARIS/books/pdf/Unconventional%20Warfare%20Pocket%20Guide_v1%200_Final_6%20April%202016.pdf).

### III. STRATEGIC CULTURE: THE RUSSIAN WAY

There, in the cradle, mothers terrify their children with the Russian name.<sup>34</sup>

—Michail Lermontov, 19<sup>th</sup>-century poet,  
Speaking of the Caucasus

#### A. INTRODUCTION

Distinct from the Western experience, a series of entangled forces have shaped Russian strategic culture and beliefs about Counter-Irregular Warfare (CIW). Measured against Western doctrine and tradition, Russian force composition, fires, and technological mismatch in Afghanistan, Chechnya, and Syria appear myopic and crude. However, in the context of Russia’s strategic culture—and the geographical and historical forces which shaped it—Russian CIW trends are an understandable, though not inevitable, outcome of the Russian experience. Though attempts to draw direct parallels between modern CIW and its predecessors in the Czarist or Soviet periods undoubtedly have limits, it is nonetheless valuable to understand the trends which continue to affect the modern Russian approach. This chapter first defines strategic culture and highlights the differences between Russian CIW and Western Counterinsurgency (COIN). Next, it examines the geographical and historical influences which have shaped the Russian approach to CIW. Finally, the chapter details the resultant trends in force composition, fires, and technology.

As former Chairman of the U.S. National Intelligence Council Fritz Ermarth notes, strategic culture is “that body of broadly shared, powerfully influential, and especially enduring attitudes, perceptions, dispositions, and reflexes that shape behavior and policy.”<sup>35</sup> Before exploring the sources of recent change in the Russian military, this chapter seeks to provide a basic understanding of those elements in Russian strategic thought that have remained constant over centuries. Such a baseline serves to highlight both

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<sup>34</sup> Michail Lermontov. “Измаил-Бей [Ishmail Bei]” 1832. <http://lermontov-lit.ru/lermontov/text/izmail-bej/izmail-bej-1.htm>. Accessed 16 August, 2021

<sup>35</sup> Ermarth, “Russian Strategic Culture.”

the depth of the recent evolution and how deeply engrained certain elements remain within Russian military thought.

Past discussions of strategic culture have spanned the spectrum from the cultural determinism of the Victorian era to strict (neo)realist interpretations. Whereas Victorian theorists saw culture as a prime driver in decision-making, realists argue that societies seek tangible advantage, and cultural influences are tangential.<sup>36</sup> Cultural realism is the best of both worlds. As defined by political scientist Alistair Johnston, cultural realism is the space wherein *realpolitik* and *idealpolitik* combine to produce culturally distinct responses.<sup>37</sup> This chapter seeks to explain from a cultural realist perspective why Russian CIW diverged from Western COIN. It is not an attempt to deny that Western COIN practices historically shared some of these traits, but instead asks why Russia maintains an enduring and distinct CIW approach.

## **B. RUSSIAN CIW VS. COIN**

CIW, as defined in Chapter I, refers to Russian military responses to irregular threats. It is distinct from counterinsurgency (COIN), which, in Western military parlance, implies a comprehensive, whole-of-government response to insurgent movements.<sup>38</sup> COIN is enshrined in doctrine, taught at military institutions, and built on a bedrock of research by key personalities.<sup>39</sup> The Russian approach to CIW has none of these characteristics. Instead, Russian practitioners overwhelmingly view countering irregular

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<sup>36</sup> Theodore Roosevelt. "The War College Speech," June 02, 1897. <http://pshs.psd202.org/documents/bmiller/1503485689.pdf>. This did not end in the Victorian period. As late as 1944, George Kennan's understanding of Soviet culture is firmly rooted in geographic and historic influences.

<sup>37</sup> Alastair Iain Johnston, "Thinking about Strategic Culture," *International Security* 19, no. 4 (1995): 64, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539119>.

<sup>38</sup> Octavian Manea, "Counterinsurgency as a Whole of Government Approach," *Small Wars Journal*, January 26, 2011, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/counterinsurgency-as-a-whole-of-government-approach>.

<sup>39</sup> Thomas E. Ricks, "The COINdinistas," *Foreign Policy* (blog), November 30, 2009, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2009/11/30/the-coindinistas/>; "Joint Publication 3-24: Counterinsurgency" (Joint Chiefs of Staff, April 25, 2015), [https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3\\_24.pdf](https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3_24.pdf); J. J. Sutherland, "Army Training Turns To Tackling Counterinsurgency," *NPR*, January 12, 2009, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=99156039>.

threats as “counter-terrorism.”<sup>40</sup> As the historian Scott McMichael notes in *Stumbling Bear*, to consider the Soviet-Afghan War as Soviet COIN is to pretend that such a concept existed in Soviet doctrine.<sup>41</sup> Insurgency was the natural uprising of the proletariat against oppressors, and as such, could not coexist intellectually with the USSR’s self-perceived role as the communist liberator. Regardless of the tactics, motivation, or composition of irregular threats, the Russian default it still to label them “terrorist” and the response “Counter-Terrorism.” References to “Russian COIN” are a misnomer.

Consider the matter of civilian casualties. In its ideal form, the acceptance of significant civilian casualties and toleration of war crimes are anathema to COIN. As General David Petraeus so famously stated: “You cannot kill your way out of an insurgency.”<sup>42</sup> Western COIN relies heavily on avoiding exploitable information operations (IO) mishaps and emphasizing courageous restraint by counterinsurgent forces.<sup>43</sup> In 2002 U.S. Army Major Jonathan Nagl addressed the need to learn and refine U.S. COIN principles from thoughtful historical analysis in his book *Learning to Eat Soup With a Knife*.<sup>44</sup> Read widely within the U.S. Army and studied for its lessons in COIN, the conversation continued during the years of the Iraq and Afghan campaigns as evidenced by Gregory Daddis’ 2013 rebuttal of Nagl’s critiques “Learning to Eat Soup With a Spoon.”<sup>45</sup> Neither of these works is definitive, but they highlight that the United States has a history (albeit a recent one) of reviewing and refining COIN approaches. Although U.S.

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<sup>40</sup> Younkyoo Kim and Stephen Blank, ‘Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Russia: Contending Paradigms and Current Perspectives’, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, vol. 36, no. 11, pp. 917–932. 2013, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2013.832115>

<sup>41</sup> Scott McMichael, *Stumbling Bear: Soviet Military Performance in Afghanistan* (New Jersey: Brasseys, 1991).

<sup>42</sup> Grace Wylar. “General Petraeus: Bringing Myth Back To The Military.” Business Insider. May 19, 2011. <https://www.businessinsider.com/how-general-david-petraeus-brought-myth-back-to-the-military-2011-5>

<sup>43</sup> Joseph H. Felter and Jacob N. Shapiro, “Limiting Civilian Casualties as Part of a Winning Strategy: The Case of Courageous Restraint,” *Daedalus* 146, no. 1 (January 1, 2017): 44–58, [https://doi.org/10.1162/DAED\\_a\\_00421](https://doi.org/10.1162/DAED_a_00421).

<sup>44</sup> Jonathan Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup With a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2002).

<sup>45</sup> Gregory Daddis, “Eating Soup with a Spoon: The U.S. Army as a ‘Learning Organization’ in the Vietnam War,” *History Faculty Articles and Research*, January 1, 2013, [https://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/history\\_articles/59](https://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/history_articles/59).

COIN has often fallen short, the ideal of minimal impact on the civilian populace has endured as an aspirational standard and a legal metric.<sup>46</sup>

Russian CIW taught a different set of lessons. Semantic definitions of success notwithstanding, the fact remains that Russian CIW operations throughout the Caucasus and Central Asia were overwhelmingly deemed effective by Russian practitioners until the Soviet-Afghan War of the 1980s. These operations relied on an enemy-centric approach that did not distinguish the civilian populace from the insurgent. Alexander Yermolov, the Russian field commander in the Caucasus in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, summarized this CIW mentality: “I desire that the terror of my name shall guard our frontiers more potently than chains or fortresses.”<sup>47</sup> Yermolov’s policies set an early standard of success, and as a result, “targeted assassinations, kidnappings, the killing of entire families, and the use of disproportionate force in response to raids became central to Russian operations.”<sup>48</sup> This approach worked, though at a high cost. During the 61 years of subjugation of the Caucasus, 24,000 Russian soldiers were killed and 75,000 wounded or captured.<sup>49</sup> In contrast, during the closest American analog (the Plains Indians Wars), the U.S. Army suffered under 7,000 killed.<sup>50</sup> Russian CIW in the Caucasus had both the scar tissue of significant casualties and the perception of success, thus imprinting it into the institutional memory of the Russian military. Leo Tolstoy’s vivid depiction of 1850s *stanitsa* life on the

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<sup>46</sup> “Department of Defense, Department of Defense Law of War Manual (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, June 2015).<https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/DOD%20Law%20of%20War%20Manual%20-20June%202015%20Updated%20Dec%202016.pdf?ver=2016-12-13-172036-190>. 187; Jack Healy, “Soldier Sentenced to Life Without Parole for Killing 16 Afghans,” *The New York Times*, August 23, 2013, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/24/us/soldier-gets-life-without-parole-in-deaths-of-afghan-civilians.html>.

<sup>47</sup> Lesley Blanch, *The Sabres of Paradise: Conquest and Vengeance in the Caucasus* (London: Tauris Parke, 2004), 24.

<sup>48</sup> King, *The Ghost of Freedom: A History of the Caucasus*, 48.

<sup>49</sup> King, 76.

<sup>50</sup> Marshall Trimble, “How Many People Died During the Indian Wars?,” *True West Magazine*, June 13, 2018, <https://truewestmagazine.com/indian-wars-deaths/>.

Terek defensive line in *The Cossacks*<sup>51</sup> and accounts of combat in *Nabeg (The Raid)*<sup>52</sup> provided a popular depiction of Tsarist CIW campaigns on a societal level, and the alien and brutal nature of Czarist CIW “seared themselves into the Russian imagination”<sup>53</sup> (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Painting of the Battle of Gimry, Dagestan, 1832<sup>54</sup>

### C. GEOGRAPHIC FACTORS

Russia’s physical and human geography have drawn the nation into small wars, resulting in a distinct CIW approach. The physical geography of Russia is notable both for

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<sup>51</sup> Leo Tolstoy, “The Cossacks,” Project Gutenberg, 1863, accessed 16 August, 2021. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/4761/4761-h/4761-h.htm>.

<sup>52</sup> Leo Tolstoy “Набег [The Raid]” 1853, accessed 23 August, 2021. [https://rvb.ru/tolstoy/01text/vol\\_2/01text/0006.htm](https://rvb.ru/tolstoy/01text/vol_2/01text/0006.htm).

<sup>53</sup> King, *The Ghost of Freedom: A History of the Caucasus*, 76.

<sup>54</sup> Source: Franz Roubaud. *The Capture of Aul Gimry, 17 October 1832*. Oil. Dagestan Museum of Fine Arts. <https://www.art-prints-on-demand.com/a/roubaud-franz/dieeroberungaulsgimryam17oktober1832.html>

both its wealth of natural resources and a shortage of natural boundaries. Before the Czarist period, Russian geography led to “a remarkable succession of Turanian nomadic peoples, Huns, Avars, Bulgars, Magyars, Khazars, Patzinaks, Cumans, Kalmuks” waging war on the proto-Rus.<sup>55</sup> In his famous Long Telegram George Kennan summarized the early Russian condition as “trying to live on vast exposed plain in a neighborhood of fierce nomadic peoples.”<sup>56</sup> The geographic vulnerability of Russia’s position did not improve with time. Under the Czars, Russia was again subject to the depredations of the Mongol empire, as well as the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth, Sweden, France, the Ottoman Empire, and the Japanese Empire of the Meiji Restoration. The cultural heartland of Kyiv lay exposed in the European plain, and the political epicenter of Moscow was without broken terrain to the south and east.<sup>57</sup> As Halford Mackinder argued in 1904, this geographic vulnerability, combined with Russia’s continuous quest to secure a warm water port, created an impetus to expand outwards in a Slavic equivalent of American Manifest Destiny.<sup>58</sup> Russian history has been defined by a desire to secure firm geographical boundaries to the East, West, and South. The resulting concept of the frontier (now loosely referred to as the Near Abroad) is a significant contributing element to Russian strategic culture, and the impetus for incremental territorial expansion resulted in numerous small wars and opportunities for CIW.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Halford Mackinder. “The Geographical Pivot of History (1904).” *The Geographical Journal* 170, no. 4 (December 2004): 298–321. [https://www.iwp.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/20131016\\_MackinderTheGeographicalJournal.pdf](https://www.iwp.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/20131016_MackinderTheGeographicalJournal.pdf)

<sup>56</sup> George Kennan, “The Long Telegram,” Wilson Center Digital Archive, 1946, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/116178>.

<sup>57</sup> Mackinder, 303.

<sup>58</sup> Tim Marshall, “Russia and the Curse of Geography,” *The Atlantic*, October 31, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/10/russia-geography-ukraine-syria/413248/>.

<sup>59</sup> The concept of the Near Abroad is discussed at length in Gerard Toal’s *Near Abroad*. He describes this term as “first emerging in 1992 as a consensus [English] translation of *blizhneye zarubezhye*, (lit. near beyond border).” The term implies a paternalistic sense of responsibility for and authority over many regions that gained statehood in the aftermath of the end of the Cold War. In Toal’s words, the expression “named a new arrangement of sovereignty, and an old familiarity, a long standing spatial entanglement and a range of geopolitical emotions.” (Toal, Gerard. *Near Abroad*, 3.)



As physical geography drove the Russian Empire outwards, the human geography of the conquered regions set the stage for consistent and recurring CIW.<sup>60</sup> In the Caucasus, the Russian Empire attempted to rule over a roiling mix of tribal factions (see Figure 2). Even after forced migrations of the Circassians, Ingush, and Chechens, the region still boasts 52 different languages as of 2020.<sup>61</sup> Similarly, the Russian Empire encountered robust societies that differed in language, religion, and culture in Central Asia. Czarist Forces faced revolts from citizens of Kazan, indigenous Siberian peoples, dissatisfied Russian military elements, the Bashkir, and the Ashtrakani, among others.<sup>62</sup> In effect, Russia—like the Qing Dynasty in Central Asia and the United States on the Great Plains—engaged in a steady stream of small wars.<sup>63</sup> The confluence of physical and human geography resulted in both a great number of CIW conflicts and provided the conditions for developing a distinct Russian approach.

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<sup>60</sup> N. F. Bugai and A. M. Gonov, “The Forced Evacuation of the Chechens and the Ingush,” *Russian Studies in History* 41, no. 2 (October 1, 2002): 43–61, <https://doi.org/10.2753/RSH1061-1983410243>.

<sup>61</sup> Seteney Shami, “Historical Processes of Identity Formation: Displacement, Settlement, and Self-Representations of the Circassians in Jordan,” *Iran & the Caucasus* 13, no. 1 (2009): 141–59; Ekaterina Sokirianskaia, “Forced Migration in the Northern Caucasus: Involving Local Stakeholders in the Process of Returning Ingush IDPs,” 2005, 19; Institute for Endangered Languages. “Language Hotspots - Caucasus.” Living Tongues. Accessed August 2, 2021. <https://www.swarthmore.edu/SocSci/langhotspots/hotspots/CAU/index.html>.

<sup>62</sup> “Казанские Походы [The Kazan Campaigns].” In *Big Russian Encyclopedia*, 12:395. Moscow, Russia, 2008. [https://bigenc.ru/domestic\\_history/text/v/2032633](https://bigenc.ru/domestic_history/text/v/2032633); Bruce Lincoln, *The Conquest of a Continent: Siberia and the Russians* (NY: Cornell University Press, 2007); Paul Avrich, *Russian Rebels: 1600–1800* (New York: Schocken Books, 1972); I.G. Akmanov, K.K. Karimov, and A.R. Khabibulinna, “The Bashkir Rebellion of 1704–1706 within the Kazan Road Administrative Unit,” *Herald of the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Bashkortostan* 27 (2018): 12–18; Avrich, *Russian Rebels: 1600–1800*.

<sup>63</sup> The use of the term “small wars” in this context refers to a contest between asymmetrically empowered adversaries, often undeclared, and (in the case of Russia) not for the survival of the state. This is not intended to detract from the fact that the aggrieved party was often fighting a war of national, or even ethnic, extermination. This definition of small war is derived from the Small Wars Journal.

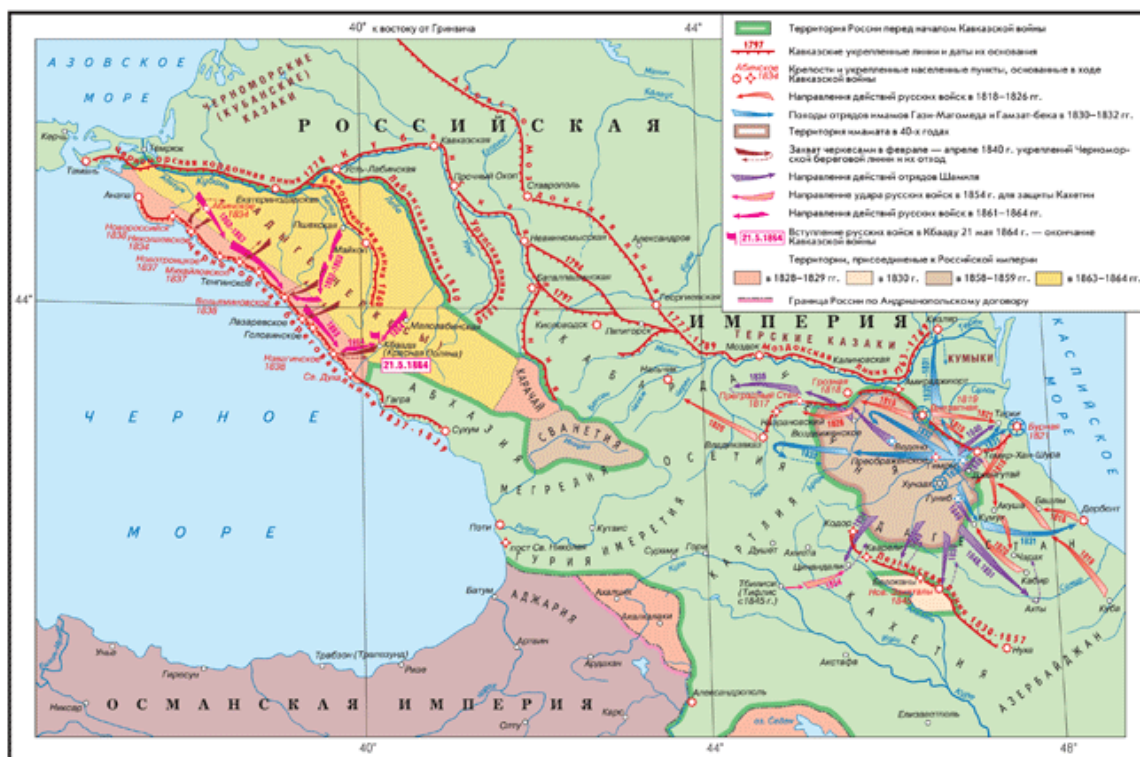


Figure 2. Map of the Caucasian Wars, 1817–1864<sup>64</sup>

#### D. HISTORICAL FACTORS

At a societal level, many influences contribute to this overarching strategic culture—three of the most significant of which are Russian Messianic perception of the state, historical reliance on military mass, and the lack of domestic accountability for human rights violations in support of CIW operations. First, the Messianic self-image. Although it has morphed to fit the systemic constraints of respective regime types, the perception of Russia as a Messianic standard-bearer on a world scale has endured and contributed to Russia’s brutal execution of CIW (see Figure 3). During the Czarist period, this manifested as a “religious philosophy, of the Holy Rus and Third Rome which defined Russia and its peoples as a God-chosen country and nation.”<sup>65</sup> This role as the unifier of

<sup>64</sup> Source: National Atlas of Russia, “Кавказская Война 1817–1864 Гг. (Caucasian War, 1817–1864),” accessed October 22, 2021, <https://xn--80aaa1bhncclci1cl5c4ep.xn--p1ai/cd4/114/114.html>.

<sup>65</sup> Dima Adamsky. “Continuity in Russian Strategic Culture.” *George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies: Security Insights* 48, no. February 2020: 8. <https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/security-insights/continuity-russian-strategic-culture-case-study-moscows-syrian-campaign-0>.

the Holy Rus further developed into the first manifestation of pan-Slavism—a critical component of the Russian response to the July crisis and the start of World War I.<sup>66</sup>

During the communist period, Lenin’s foundational view of Russia as the locomotive of global communism coopted this stance and adapted it to the new atheist world view.<sup>67</sup> Much of the spirit built on the foundations of the Orthodox Church. The implicit logic of Messianic standard-bearing excused small deviations in the name of the greater good. From Lenin’s perspective, Soviet small wars “would demand zig-zags, subterfuges and repellant compromises with temporary and unreliable allies. To rule out any such measure on principle would be criminal.”<sup>68</sup> Since the dissolution of the USSR, the Russian Ministry of Defense has expanded and deepened its ties with the Orthodox church, including iconography, manipulation abroad, and monolithic works to highlight the relationship.<sup>69</sup> Over each period, the Messianic trope has morphed and now lives on as expansionist nationalism and neo-pan-Slavism.<sup>70</sup> This cultural justification has historically contributed to Russian involvement in small wars and provides a framework to justify unpalatable approaches to countering irregular threats; after all the ends justified the means.

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<sup>66</sup> Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (New York, NY.: Harper, 2013), 270–79. Orlando Figes, *Crimea: The Last Crusade* (Allen Lane, 2010).

<sup>67</sup> Sherr, *Hard Diplomacy and Soft Coercion: Russia’s Influence Abroad*.

<sup>68</sup> Sherr, 28.

<sup>69</sup> Paul Goble, “Russian Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate Supports Repressions, Militarism,” Euromaidan Press, August 19, 2016, <http://euromaidanpress.com/2016/08/19/scholar-russian-orthodox-church-moscow-patriarchate-supports-domestic-repressions-militaristic-rhetoric-euromaidan-press/>; The Moscow Times, “In Photos: Russia Unveils New Military Mega-Church,” The Moscow Times, April 27, 2020, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/04/27/in-photos-russia-unveils-new-military-mega-church-a70110>.

<sup>70</sup> Sherr, 23.



Figure 3. Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu at the Consecration of the Armed Forces Cathedral, 2020<sup>71</sup>

In addition to Messianism, reliance on military mass—dogpiling of forces to attrit the opponent as opposed to a Jominian style war-of-maneuver—has shaped the Russian approach to CIW. Throughout the Czarist period, the constant threat of state actors resulted in a large, conscripted Russian army—often committed to small wars.<sup>72</sup> As exemplified by the rapid mobilization of the Russian response to Napoleon, the Czarist approach relied on “an army based on universal service and a large trained reserve or militia.”<sup>73</sup> The myths of the October Revolution and subsequent Civil War did nothing to dissuade the forming Soviet military elite of the usefulness of large, massed formations. The Great

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<sup>71</sup> Source: The Moscow Times, “Russia Consecrates Grandiose Armed Forces Cathedral,” The Moscow Times, June 15, 2020, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/06/15/russia-inaugurates-grandiose-armed-forces-cathedral-a70567>.

<sup>72</sup> Stephen Velychenko, *The Size of the Imperial Russian Bureaucracy and Army in Comparative Perspective* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2001).

<sup>73</sup> Walter Pintner, “Russian Military Thought: The Western Model and the Shadow of Suvorov,” in *Makers of Modern Strategy* (Princeton University Press, 1986), 354–375.

Patriotic War (1941-1945) further solidified this element of Russian strategic culture—it was the Russian conscript that defeated fascism. The Soviet military fielded the largest force in the history of warfare and suffered over 26 million casualties in the process.<sup>74</sup> Following the defeat of Nazi Germany, the Red Army demonstrated its ability to mass by pivoting over 1.5 million conscripts and twenty-six thousand artillery pieces to bear against Japanese forces in Manchuria.<sup>75</sup> Two seminal victories—the grinding battle of the “Eastern Front” and the lightning-quick Manchurian Campaign—were fought and won by the Soviet ability to mass men and material in overwhelming numbers. In the aftermath of the Great Patriotic War, the Soviets retained universal conscription as the bedrock of their land defense during the Cold War.<sup>76</sup>

Reliance on mass over quality or precision is equally evident in Soviet military technology. Regarded as a rugged, reliable weapon, the *Avtomat Kalashnikova* is notably simple and designed to be maintained and used by conscripts.<sup>77</sup> Whereas the United States Field Artillery of the Cold War relied on a 6400 mil artillery sight and scrupulously mandated the Five Requirements for Accurate and Predicted Fires, the Red Army defaulted to the less accurate 6000 mil sight and invested in D-30 howitzers, easy to maintain for conscripted artillerymen.<sup>78</sup> The anecdote is telling: painting the picture of a Russian concept of war that relies more heavily on mass and quantity than that of their Western counterparts.

Almost gravitationally, the Russian reliance on mass created an overwhelming deference to the military component of the DIME (Diplomacy, Information, Military,

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<sup>74</sup> Michael Ellman and S. Maksudov, “Soviet Deaths in the Great Patriotic War: A Note,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 46, no. 4 (January 1, 1994): 671–80, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668139408412190>.

<sup>75</sup> Michael E. Ekman, “The 1945 Soviet Manchurian Campaign: A Model for the Sino-Soviet War.” *Naval War College Review* 27, no. 1 (1974): 81–89

<sup>76</sup> Grau and Bartles, *The Russian Way of War: Force Structure, Tactics, and Modernization of the Russian Ground Forces*, 3.

<sup>77</sup> C.J. Chivers, “The AK-47: ‘The Gun’ That Changed The Battlefield,” *NPR*, October 12, 2010, sec. Author Interviews, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=130493013>.

<sup>78</sup> EUTM Mali Press, “Young Malian Soldiers Become the Pioneers of the 614th Field Artillery Battery,” accessed October 20, 2021, <https://eutmmali.eu/young-malian-soldiers-become-the-pioneers-of-the-614th-field-artillery-battery/>.

Economic) in CIW operations. Within the Soviet Army, the officer corps further reinforced this by emphasizing the operational level of warfare. Soviet generals viewed the ideal as “a politics-free zone where commanders could demonstrate their mastery of managing large forces over wide areas.”<sup>79</sup> Whereas Western doctrine defined COIN as a fundamentally political struggle, Soviet generals believed it existed in the exclusively military realm. As summarized by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, “Reliance on the military power of the state, acquired at great cost and organized like that of military powers of the past, was handed down to the Soviets by historical experience.”<sup>80</sup> At a policy level, Russian strategic culture leaned towards diMe instead of DIME.

Finally, during all three periods of modern Russian military history (Czarist, Soviet, post-Communist), CIW has taken place against the backdrop of an autocratic regime. Although this does not wholly remove domestic pressure, as evidenced by the Soviet anti-war movement of the 1980s,<sup>81</sup> Russia’s domestic political structure does insulate the regime in several respects. Western forces are careful to pay at least lip service to collateral damage and international law. By contrast, in the Czarist, Soviet, and post-Communist period, Russian forces have not restricted the savagery of their CIW campaigns.<sup>82</sup> Although Russian casualties have led to domestic pushback, the infliction of civilian casualties while countering irregular threats has not. This combination of Messianically justified expansionism with a lack of domestic pushback has created the conditions for some of Russian CIW’s notable traits, specifically a much higher threshold for civilian

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<sup>79</sup> Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 202.

<sup>80</sup> Robert Cassidy. “Russia in Afghanistan and Chechnya: Military Strategic Culture and the Paradoxes of Asymmetric Conflict.” Army War College, 2003. [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/robert-cassidy/publication/237342743\\_russia\\_in\\_afghanistan\\_and\\_chechnya\\_military\\_strategic\\_culture\\_and\\_the\\_paradoxes\\_of\\_asymmetric\\_conflict/links/0046352a017266a2f5000000/russia-in-afghanistan-and-chechnya-military-strategic-culture-and-the-paradoxes-of-asymmetric-conflict.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/robert-cassidy/publication/237342743_russia_in_afghanistan_and_chechnya_military_strategic_culture_and_the_paradoxes_of_asymmetric_conflict/links/0046352a017266a2f5000000/russia-in-afghanistan-and-chechnya-military-strategic-culture-and-the-paradoxes-of-asymmetric-conflict.pdf). 9.

<sup>81</sup> CIA, “USSR: Domestic Fallout From the Afghan War” (Central Intelligence Agency, February, 1988), [https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/DOC\\_0000500659.pdf](https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000500659.pdf), [cia.gov/readingrooms](https://www.cia.gov/readingrooms), accessed August 17, 2021.

<sup>82</sup> Paul B. Rich and Isabelle Duyvesteyn, eds., “Counterinsurgency in a Non- Democratic State: The Russian Example,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency*, (Routledge, 2012), 293–307, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203132609-32>.

casualties.<sup>83</sup> Whereas geography provided the imperative for the development of Russian CIW, it is the historical factors that influenced operational trends in CIW force composition, fires, and technology—topics to which this chapter now turns.

## E. STRATEGIC CULTURE AND THEMES IN CIW

Russian geographical pressures and historic experiences set conditions for recurring trends in Russian CIW. An expedient and useful way to determine both continuities and points of debarkation from the Russian CIW norm is by assessing the trends through the themes of force composition, application of fires, and development or integration of technology. These three themes are not comprehensive, but given their traditional role in Russian CIW, they are valuable.

### 1. Force Composition

Russian CIW force composition has been historically ill-suited to countering irregular threats. In the Czarist period, Russia's expansionist policies and small wars drove the demand for standing garrisons along fortified lines and contested frontiers.<sup>84</sup> This impulse to expand, occupy, and integrate by force required dispersed garrisons such as the Cossack *stanitsas* of the Kura line throughout the early to mid-1800s. While persistent, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, frontier wars—much like in the United States--were relegated to peripheral status.<sup>85</sup> Russian military leaders viewed CIW operations as not requiring

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<sup>83</sup> The American experience in Vietnam was by no means devoid of civilian casualties and collateral damage. The point of distinction, however, is that while many atrocities occurred in Russian small wars, they have no comparable incident to the trial of William Calley. Even earlier, the 1902 trials of Major Littleton Waller and "Hell-Roarin' Jake" Smith for atrocities in the Philippine Insurrection indicate an American discomfort with human rights violations that does not exist in comparable Russian records. As late as 2019, President Donald Trump's pardoning of Matthew Golestyn was met with military pushback by then-USASOC commander Francis Beaudette's refusal to reinstate Golestyn's Special Forces tab. The Russian MoD has no such history of prosecuting extrajudicial killings—even though the American record is far from clean. The trial of William Calley is a well-known matter of public record. The American response to war crimes in the Philippines is addressed *Honor in the Dust* by Gregg Jones. The trial and subsequent pardon of Matthew Golestyn was covered extensively by the *New York Times*, (Phillips, David. "Army Denies Request by Soldier Pardoned by Trump")

<sup>84</sup> Arthur Tsutsiev. "1791–1801: The Caucasus Defensive Line from Kizlyar to Taman." *Atlas of the Ethno-Political History of the Caucasus*, 13–13. Yale University Press, 2014. <https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300160109-008>

<sup>85</sup> Robert Utley, *The Nature of The Frontier*.

specialized force structure, and garrisons were often manned by lower caliber troops than those reserved for conventional campaigning--CIW was to be conducted on the cheap. When rebellions occurred closer to the heartland, large untailored forces responded. Czarist and later Soviet forces made little to no efforts to placate targeted populations on the frontier, and CIW-specific forces and Civil Affairs elements did not exist. This case of ill-suited tools is exemplified in the late Soviet period by the commitment of a preponderance of mechanized troops to bolster the Communist government of Afghanistan. Until recent history, reliance on mass and a lack of tailored units have defined Russian CIW forces.

## 2. Fires

Russian CIW has historically relied heavily on the use of massed fires. Although this same statement could describe past examples of Western COIN, Russia has not undergone domestic pressure to reduce civilian casualties.<sup>86</sup> On the contrary, Russia has experienced domestic pressure to reduce friendly military losses in the Afghan War and as recently as Ukraine often at the expense of collateral damage.<sup>87</sup> This indifference towards collateral damage and concern for minimizing friendly casualties has incentivized the use of massed fires and ensured it persists in the Russian approach. A Messianic justification combined with a reliance on military mass and a lack of domestic sensitivities resulted in a dependence on massed fires that fell out of vogue in the Western concept of COIN in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. Opposition to the Rolling Thunder campaign of the 1960s, napalm in Vietnam, and the U.S. airstrike on a *medecin sans frontiers* hospital in Kunduz have no parallel in Russian domestic politics. As a result, the use of massed fires and callousness to civilian casualties emerged as a hallmark of Russian CIW.

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<sup>86</sup> Russell Weigley. "Annihilation of a People: The Indian Fighters." In *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1973

<sup>87</sup> Terrence McCoy, "What Does Russia Tell the Mothers of Soldiers Killed in Ukraine? Not Much.," *Washington Post*, accessed October 20, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/08/29/what-does-russia-tell-the-mothers-of-soldiers-killed-in-ukraine-not-much/>; CIA, "USSR: Domestic Fallout From the Afghan War."



### 3. Technology

In addition to force composition and fires, historical factors influence Russian CIW's consistent technological undermatch. During the late Czarist period, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, only a fraction of the military budget applied to improvements in military hardware, with a low priority placed on domestic technological innovation.<sup>88</sup> Even in the aftermath of the Russo-Japanese War—a cautionary tale in lagging technological investment—Czarist analysis demonstrated the Russian mindset by instead attributing Japanese victory to “spirit and enthusiasm.”<sup>89</sup> In the United States, the drive for westward expansion led to a vast improvement in small arms—from the 45.70 trapdoor carbine to the Chaffee-Reece rifle.<sup>90</sup> The American COIN experience in Vietnam brought about the development of unmanned aerial vehicles, the first Military Free Fall (MFF) jump in combat, and the integration of wire-guided missiles into air support, to name only a few such tech improvements.<sup>91</sup> American (and to a lesser extent Western) COIN has relied on technology to reduce casualties—both friendly military and civilian since the end of Vietnam.<sup>92</sup> The nature of Russian reliance on mass and preparation solely for the “next big war” combined with the limited entrepreneurial incentive of the Soviet military system to stifle innovation on the one hand and operational ingenuity on the other. In short, Russian technological advancement—though often sufficient for large conscript armies—has consistently lagged Western peers due to historical influences.

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<sup>88</sup> Pintner, “Russian Military Thought: The Western Model and the Shadow of Suvorov,” 360.

<sup>89</sup> Pintner, 368.

<sup>90</sup> Holt Bodinson, “The Curious Chaffee-Reece,” GUNS Magazine, March 7, 2019, <https://gunsmagazine.com/our-experts/the-curious-chaffee-reece/>.

<sup>91</sup> “5 Important Pieces of Military Technology Developed for the Vietnam War | Jobs for Veterans | G.I. Jobs,” accessed August 2, 2021, <https://www.gijobs.com/5-pieces-technology-developed-vietnam-war/>; specialforceshistory.com, “CCN HALO Document – Artifact,” accessed October 20, 2021, <https://specialforceshistory.com/uniform/ccn-halo-document-2/>; Imperial War Museum, “A Brief History of Drones,” accessed October 20, 2021, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/a-brief-history-of-drones>.

<sup>92</sup> John Lynn, *Battle: A History of Combat and Culture* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2003), 321.

## **F. CONCLUSION**

Russian strategic culture has played as significant a role in shaping the Russian CIW. While not monolithic, Russian strategic culture is shaped geographic and historical influences that give it a distinctive timbre and influence on CIW. Physical and human geography combined to create the conditions for the Russian small war experience. Russian Messianism, reliance on mass, and lack of domestic criticism set the conditions for recurring trends at the operational level in force composition, fires, and technology.

As perhaps the best-known example of the three trends, witness the last CIW operation of the Soviet Union, the Soviet-Afghan War. The war was a combination of both physical geographic pressures to strengthen the southern flank of the USSR on the bulwark of the Hindu Kush. In a way dissimilar in scale but similar in spirit to the Caucasus the blanket imposition of Soviet ideals and imperialism on the ethnic melting pot of Afghanistan made the need for CIW operations likely from the beginning. On an operational level, the CIW force composition was tailored for force-on-force clashes on the European plain, not for waging CIW against irregular forces. Application of fires with no collateral damage mitigation by Soviet troops resulted in staggering civilian casualties but no domestic outcry. Although the Russian military had relatively modernized hardware, little of the technology suited the fight at hand. Geographic conditions made the onset of CIW in Afghanistan likely, and historical facets of Russian Strategic Culture shaped the recurring themes of ill-suited force composition, misuse of fires, and lagging application of available technology.

This chapter has sought to highlight the deep and enduring sources of Russian strategic culture and effect on how Russia operationally employs military force in a CIW environment. Over the subsequent chapters, this thesis will explore how operational trends have shifted and evolved over the last 25 years to produce a distinctly Russian CIW—and its implications for U.S. strategy and force employment.

#### IV. THE FIRST CHECHEN WAR: THE CHECHEN PROBLEM

And savage are those canyons' tribes,  
Their god is freedom, their law is war<sup>93</sup>

—Mikhail Lermontov, Russian poet and military officer  
writing of his encounters with the Chechen people, ca. 1832

The First Chechen War (1994-1996) marked the first significant test of the Russian Federation's military following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Russian Forces entering Grozny in December 1994 were vastly underprepared for the task at hand. After an initial stunning defeat, Russian forces quickly adapted the tools at their disposal and deployed increasingly brutal tactics, resulting in the successful capture of Grozny. Ultimately, the capture of Grozny proved a pyrrhic victory, and Russian forces struggled to retain hold of the capital, much less the rest of the country. Russian troops withdrew less than two years later; open hostilities returned in 1999.

While in one sense the First Chechen War stands out as the nadir of Russian Counter Irregular Warfare (CIW) capabilities and execution, it was a distinct turning point in the Russian CIW approach. It demonstrated unequivocally that neither Russia's extensive experience crushing rebellions on its periphery nor its Cold War preparations to battle NATO had adequately postured to the military to respond to contemporary asymmetric threats. The conflict laid bare the dilapidated state of the Russian Armed Forces after 1991. With poorly trained troops, ill-equipped units, and a complete lack of a modern counterinsurgency or counterterrorism strategy, the Russian experience in Chechnya echoes with similar failures as the Soviet-Afghan campaign of the previous decade. While the previous chapter discussed how critical themes of the Russian CIW approach have emerged as products of Russian geography and history, this chapter explores the first major CIW operation of the Russian Federation. Specifically, it discusses the limited successes and significant shortcomings of the Russian CIW force composition, fires integration, and incorporation of available technology in the conflict. In doing so, this

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<sup>93</sup> Mikhail Lermontov, "Измаил-Бей [Ishmael Bay]," 1832, <http://lermontov-lit.ru/lermontov/text/izmail-bej/izmail-bej-1.htm>.

chapter also serves as a baseline to highlight how far the Russian military has advanced to reach its present capabilities just two decades later.

## A. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

As with the Caucasus region more broadly, Chechnya has long been a flashpoint for tensions and conflict along Russia's frontier. The Chechen people have a long history of fiercely resisting Russian attempts at conquest dating back to the campaigns of the Romanov dynasty and immortalized by Leo Tolstoy in stories such as "The Cossacks" and "Hadji Murad." Conversely, Russia has historically taken remarkably severe measures to establish and maintain control over the region, resulting in simmering tensions between the two peoples for the past two hundred years.<sup>94</sup>

Consider Joseph Stalin's Operation Lentil (1944).<sup>95</sup> During this operation, Soviet troops deported, resettled, and scattered nearly the entire Chechen population of 480,000 people across the remote interior of Soviet Russia and Siberia. While the Chechens were authorized to return to their homelands in the following years, the events remained seared in the Chechen consciousness as the *Ardakh*, or Exodus. Estimates of Chechen deaths during this mass deportation range up to 200,000. The Chechens who returned to their Chechnya following the death of Stalin found their homes and lands occupied by outsiders, leading to decades of civil strife.<sup>96</sup>

The reforms advanced by Mikhail Gorbachev in the 1980s provided the (in the end limited) political space for a Chechen nationalist movement to begin actively campaigning for independence from the Soviet Union. This movement culminated with former Soviet Air Force General Dzhokhar Dudayev ousting the sitting head of the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic in late 1990 with clear aspirations for a Chechnya

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<sup>94</sup> Gregory Celestan, "Wounded Bear: The Ongoing Russian Military Operation in Chechnya" (U.S. Foreign Military Studies Office, August 1996), 1, <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/fmso-monographs/241452>.

<sup>95</sup> Claire Bigg, "'There Was No Water, No Food' -- Chechens Remember Horror Of 1944 Deportations," accessed August 4, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/chechen-deportation-1944-survivors/25273614.html>.

<sup>96</sup> Neil Hauer, "Stalin's Great Crime in the Caucasus," *The Moscow Times*, February 25, 2019, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/02/25/stalins-great-crime-in-the-caucasus-a64615>.

independent from the Soviet Union or its Russian successor.<sup>97</sup> Seizing upon Boris Yeltsin's challenge to "take all the sovereignty you can swallow," Dudayev declared the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria independent on November 1, 1991, just two months before the dissolution of the Soviet Union.<sup>98</sup> On November 9<sup>th</sup>, Moscow responded by rejecting the declaration and dispatching a Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) regiment (an estimated 300–600 soldiers) to arrest Dudayev and restore order.<sup>99</sup> However, upon arriving in Grozny, Moscow's security forces were vastly outnumbered and surrounded by Dudayev's forces.<sup>100</sup> Taken aback by this stiff and organized resistance, Moscow balked and declined to escalate the situation further. Two days later, the MVD forces handed over their weapons to the Chechen militants and departed by bus, resulting in a transient state of de facto independence for the republic.<sup>101</sup>

From 1992 to late 1994, Chechnya retained this state of informal independence. However, an independent Chechnya proved completely intolerable for Moscow, prompting the Federal Counter-Intelligence Service (FSK) to leverage the Provisional Chechen Council, which rejected the Dudayev government and remained loyal to Moscow.<sup>102</sup> On November 26, 1994, these loyalist forces, backed by Russian tank crews and Russian airpower, began offensive operations in Chechnya, culminating in an assault on Grozny to seize critical infrastructure. The results proved disastrous.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Mark Galeotti, *Russia's Wars in Chechnya 1994–2009* (Oxford, UK: Osprey Publishing, 2014), 21; Tony Barber, "Obituary: Dzhokhar Dudayev," October 23, 2011, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/obituary-dzhokhar-dudayev-1306699.html>.

<sup>98</sup> Gail W. Lapidus, "Contested Sovereignty: The Tragedy of Chechnya," *International Security* 23, no. 1 (1998): 12, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539261>.

<sup>99</sup> Robert Schaefer, *The Insurgency in Chechnya and the North Caucasus: From Gazavat to Jihad* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2010), 115.

<sup>100</sup> Galeotti, *Russia's Wars in Chechnya 1994–2009*, 31.

<sup>101</sup> Robert W. Schaefer, *The Insurgency in Chechnya and the North Caucasus: From Gazavat to Jihad* (Westport, United States: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2010), 115, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ebook-nps/detail.action?docID=617073>.

<sup>102</sup> Galeotti, *Russia's Wars in Chechnya 1994–2009*, 31.

<sup>103</sup> Stasys Knezys and Romanas Sedlickas, *The War in Chechnya* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1999), 46.

Dudayev's forces allowed the loyalists to enter the city with relative ease before systematically ambushing and decimating the attacking armored columns. They decisively defeated the loyalist forces, killing or capturing 52 of the 78 Russian tank crews accompanying the Chechens. Dudayev's forces amplified their victory by parading the captured Russian soldiers on public television broadcasts, humiliating Moscow.<sup>104</sup> Having failed twice to assert control over Chechnya without committing the military, Moscow hurriedly began preparations for a military invasion to regain control of the republic.

## **B. FORCE COMPOSITION: LESS THAN THE SUM OF ITS PARTS**

While on paper the Russian Federation inherited the bulk of the Soviet Union's military power, in practice most of these forces had continued to steadily deteriorate as the Soviet Union dissolved and the Russian Federation struggled to salvage its core. Insufficient funding and mass exemptions or deferments meant most Russian battalions remained manned at 55% or less.<sup>105</sup> Basic requirements such as housing, feeding, and paying its forces proved difficult for the Russian Army, much less conducting large-scale training. In 1994, the Russian Army had not conducted regiment or division level training in over two years, while battalions rarely executed field training even once a year.<sup>106</sup>

Furthermore, the Russian Army remained anchored to Cold War strategic thinking, anticipating divisions clashing on the plains of central Europe rather than battalions fighting block by block in the Caucasus.<sup>107</sup> Within this context, little attention was paid to either urban combat or irregular warfare. When the threat of a breakaway republic forced Moscow to take action, it lacked any dedicated tools to execute CIW. Instead it possessed two ill-fitted tools: A military designed to mass divisions for large scale combat, and MVD

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<sup>104</sup> Galeotti, *Russia's Wars in Chechnya 1994–2009*, 31.

<sup>105</sup> Lester Grau, "Changing Russian Urban Tactics: The Aftermath of the Battle for Grozny," *INSS Strategic Forum*, no. 38 (July 1995): 1, [https://community.apan.org/cfs-file/\\_key/docpreview-s/00-00-08-56-82/1995\\_2D00\\_07\\_2D00\\_01-Changing-Russian-Urban-Tactics-\\_2D00\\_-The-Aftermath-of-the-Battle-\\_2800\\_Grau\\_2900\\_.pdf](https://community.apan.org/cfs-file/_key/docpreview-s/00-00-08-56-82/1995_2D00_07_2D00_01-Changing-Russian-Urban-Tactics-_2D00_-The-Aftermath-of-the-Battle-_2800_Grau_2900_.pdf).

<sup>106</sup> Grau, 1.

<sup>107</sup> Olga Olikier, *Russia's Chechen Wars 1994–2000: Lessons from Urban Combat* (Santa Monica, Calif: RAND Corporation, 2001), 5, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/mr1289a>.

troops designed to execute police actions against criminals or terrorists. Neither force possessed adequate CIW expertise to feasibly bring a nation under arms back into the fold.

The invasion plans called for three separate assault groups (totaling just under 24,000 troops) to converge on Grozny, and for operations to begin less than two weeks after the Russian-backed loyalists' failed attempt. The dilapidated state of the Russian Army and the hurried preparations forced commanders to merge units in an *ad hoc* manner to build the essential elements of the assault groups. Commanders carved companies out of battalions, battalions out of regiments, etc.<sup>108</sup>

Exacerbating matters, the Russian Army's reliance on conscription and inadequate training would continuously haunt it as it slogged through the brutal fighting on the streets of Grozny and the countryside. According to Oliker, "One participant estimated that fratricide accounted for as much as 60 percent of Russian casualties in Chechnya."<sup>109</sup> Moreover, by the time the Chechens mounted their 1995 counterattack on Grozny, most of the Russian soldiers who had fought in the first siege of Grozny had already reached the end of their term of service. The troops who replaced them thus had none of the experience from the initial battles and had to relearn the same deadly lessons.<sup>110</sup>

The MVD forces which accompanied the Russian military, suffered from similar problems, albeit to a lesser extent. Officers routinely received their pay two to three months late, and their forces retained only 50% of their allocation of weapons and equipment.<sup>111</sup> Meanwhile, the ministry remained caught in a transition period as the Internal Affairs Army pivoted from its previous missions of guarding government installations to focusing more heavily on operational units, fast reaction teams, and special purpose detachments.<sup>112</sup> However, the MVD had maintained specialty units designed for counter-terror missions and hostage rescue which would prove invaluable in the coming conflict. In sum, on the

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<sup>108</sup> Knezys and Sedlickas, *The War in Chechnya*, 59.

<sup>109</sup> Oliker, *Russia's Chechen Wars 1994–2000: Lessons from Urban Combat*, 16.

<sup>110</sup> Oliker, 8.

<sup>111</sup> Knezys and Sedlickas, *The War in Chechnya*, 56.

<sup>112</sup> Oliker, *Russia's Chechen Wars 1994–2000: Lessons from Urban Combat*, 8.

eve of the invasion of Chechnya, the Russian assault groups prepared to invade the breakaway republic with poorly manned, poorly equipped elements with virtually no large-scale maneuver training, limited unit cohesion, and a heavy reliance on conscripts serving single year terms.

### C. FIRES INTEGRATION: KILLING FLIES WITH SLEDGEHAMMERS

Despite some early successes, the Russian military failed to integrate combat aviation and fires assets in any manner close to a combined arms or joint fires concept. Additionally, while the Russian government may have displayed some intention to employ these assets in a more restricted, precision role, this notion was quickly tossed aside as casualties mounted among Russian ground forces. Under pressure and facing unexpectedly firm resistance from the Chechen forces, the Russian forces quickly resorted to leveraging fires as a blunt instrument. Artillery and air strikes were used to deny the Chechen forces refuge and coerce the civilian population, rather than incorporated into true combined arms maneuver, much less a coherent CIW campaign.<sup>113</sup>

In advance of the ground invasion, Russian bombers successfully neutralized the entirety of Chechnya's military aviation, approximately 266 aircraft, *via* attacks on the Chechen airfields with Su-25 Frogfoot close air support aircraft on December 1st, 1994. Subsequently, Russia's air force employed air patrols supported by airborne warning and control system (AWACS) aircraft to effectively eliminate any possibility of Chechen air attack or resupply.<sup>114</sup>

The initial two-week aerial and rocket bombardment of Grozny in early December was described as the most severe bombing of a European city since the firebombing of Dresden (1945).<sup>115</sup> While quantitative evidence of this claim remains lacking,

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<sup>113</sup> In several ways, the Russian maneuver concept resembles the antithesis Stephen Biddle's "Modern System" as explained in 2004 book *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle*. Rather than maneuvering decentralized elements to close with and destroy the enemy, Russian forces relied on extreme centralization of both force and decision making.

<sup>114</sup> Timothy Thomas, "Air Operation in Low Intensity Conflict: The Case of Chechnya," *Airpower Journal*, 1997, 3. <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA515085.pdf>

<sup>115</sup> Schaefer, *The Insurgency in Chechnya and the North Caucasus: From Gazavat to Jihad*, 128.



photographic evidence confirms that much of Grozny had been reduced to rubble when the Russian ground forces reached the city. With the siege in Grozny underway, Russian air forces began to use cluster munitions against villages in the Chechen countryside, primarily targeting suspected rebel strongholds.

Several sources point towards an initial Russian desire to limit civilian casualties and emphasize precision strikes during the invasion. On December 24th, President Yeltsin prohibited the bombing of Grozny in support of the ground assault, which at the time was still anticipated to largely be a show of force rather than a protracted fight.<sup>116</sup> Operational-level commanders urged subordinates to employ precision-guided munitions when striking rebel forces.<sup>117</sup> Meanwhile, rules of engagement restricted ground troops to only firing when the enemy had shot first.<sup>118</sup>

However, concern for collateral damage and hopes of employing precision fires dissipated after the devastating failure of the New Year's Eve ground assault and as the limitations of the Russian fire support integration became clear. By January 3<sup>rd</sup>, combat aircraft received approval to bomb Grozny in support of ground forces. As the campaign continued, estimates place the civilian to rebel death ratio at nearly eight to one.<sup>119</sup> Regardless of any early intentions in Moscow to moderate the use of artillery against civilians, the forces engaged in Chechnya quickly resorted to their historic patterns, substituting massed artillery and air support in lieu of infantry maneuver or precision fires, inflicting tremendous cost of the Chechen people and infrastructure (see Figure 4).<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Olikier, *Russia's Chechen Wars 1994–2000: Lessons from Urban Combat*, 15.

<sup>117</sup> Thomas, "Air Operation in Low Intensity Conflict: The Case of Chechnya," 4.

<sup>118</sup> Olikier, *Russia's Chechen Wars 1994–2000: Lessons from Urban Combat*, 15.

<sup>119</sup> Thomas, "Air Operation in Low Intensity Conflict: The Case of Chechnya," 3.

<sup>120</sup> Zhukov, "Counterinsurgency in a Non- Democratic State," 7.



Figure 4. Grozny, January 1995<sup>121</sup>

#### **D. INTELLIGENCE AND TECHNOLOGY: A HUMBLING TECHNOLOGICAL PARITY WITH AN ASYMMETRIC FOE**

The Russian military failed to integrate available technology at multiple levels adequately. The Chechen forces had inherited or stolen most of their weapons and equipment from Russian military units withdrawing only a few years prior. Since the Russian forces were still struggling to maintain their equipment, much less upgrade or issue new equipment, the Russian Army encountered a foe that possessed most, if not all, of the same technology available to them.

This situation was further exacerbated by a shocking lack of intelligence available at all levels of the Russian military. While planning the operation, the Russian military only possessed 1:50,000 and 1:100,000 scale maps, as opposed to more detailed 1:25,000 or 1:12,500 scale.<sup>122</sup> Planners lacked any satellite imagery due to cost-cutting measures imposed on the desperate Russian military budget. Weather hampered the few attempts to

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<sup>121</sup> Source: Higgins, “The War That Continues to Shape Russia, 25 Years Later.”

<sup>122</sup> Grau, “Changing Russian Urban Tactics: The Aftermath of the Battle for Grozny,” 2.

capture aerial photography in the weeks leading up to the attack on Grozny. As the operation transitioned from planning to execution, few maps or aerial photographs ever reached tactical commanders, allowing units to quickly become disoriented and lost upon entering the city.<sup>123</sup> Commanders on the ground ultimately resorted to looting bookshops to remedy this embarrassing deficiency with civilian tourist maps. Though this was not the first time a modern invasion force neglected such basics, this lesson would stick with the Russian military in its subsequent small wars.

As the Russians began engaging in fierce fighting with Chechen rebels, the streets of Grozny highlighted the abysmal state of technological integration among the Russian forces. With their access to and familiarity with Russian radio systems, the Chechen rebels enjoyed constant access to Russian communications early in the conflict. The Russians made this even easier by initially transmitting without any encryption. Although the Russians possessed the technology to encrypt their communications securely, few of the forces participating in the campaign had received the necessary encryption devices or adequate training to incorporate it.<sup>124</sup> When conducting operations at night, Russian soldiers often used infrared night vision devices.<sup>125</sup> This allowed Chechen rebels operating with passive night vision goggles, which highlight infrared light, to easily identify Russian positions and either bypass or attack them as desired.<sup>126</sup> Given the Russian military's consistent failures to incorporate readily available technology, the conscripts on the ground often found themselves tactically outmatched by an opponent who not only used their own equipment but also used it more effectively.

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<sup>123</sup> Grau, 2.

<sup>124</sup> Olikier, *Russia's Chechen Wars 1994–2000: Lessons from Urban Combat*, 18.

<sup>125</sup> Infrared night vision devices or function by projecting infrared light to actively assist the device in illuminating the targeted area for the user. These types of devices typically work well in environment in which the opponent does not possess night vision technology. However, infrared light is easily seen by other night vision devices, especially those operating passively- i.e., devices which amplify existing light without projecting a light source of their own.

<sup>126</sup> Olikier, *Russia's Chechen Wars 1994–2000: Lessons from Urban Combat*, 16.

## E. CONCLUSION: THE SOVIET ARMY MEETS THE GUERRILLA

The First Chechen War marked a stunning and embarrassing defeat for a nation that had maintained such an impressive success rate at crushing rebellion along its borders. Before Afghanistan, Russia had suppressed 16 of 17 significant insurgencies or rebellions in the 70 years following the Bolshevik Revolution.<sup>127</sup> Now, over less than a decade, both the Soviet and Russian armies had been dealt humiliating defeats by vastly underestimated foes. The brief lull in hostilities between Chechnya and Russia would allow the Russian military adequate time to begin to tentatively step back from its Cold War, myopic focus on large-scale maneuver warfare and begin to shift towards a more agile force. With this agility would come an increased emphasis on scalable expeditionary forces and the dedicated CIW capabilities.

However, the political ramifications of the First Chechen War extend beyond the Russian military. The domestic frustration and sense of humiliation paved the way for more aggressive, assertive leadership in Moscow. Vladimir Putin would capitalize on these sentiments in spades as he consolidated his grip on Russian governance. Additionally, the ferocity of the fighting blended with ethnic and religious tensions in the surrounding region. The very nature of the conflict shifted from a political movement seeking independence to a jihad seeking battle with Russia on multiple fronts. In this way, the First Chechen War marks an interesting transition point between Glenn Robinson's first two "waves of global jihad": The first wave focused on liberating Muslim lands from foreign occupiers and the second wave coalescing around the desire to evict the United States from the Middle East.<sup>128</sup> For these reasons and more, the First Chechen War remains a case study of lasting relevance, with repercussions from the conflict continuing to the present day.

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<sup>127</sup> Zhukov, "Counterinsurgency in a Non- Democratic State," 5.

<sup>128</sup> Glenn E. Robinson, "The Four Waves of Global Jihad, 1979–2017," *Middle East Policy* 24, no. 3 (2017): 70–88, <https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.12287>.

## V. THE SECOND CHECHEN WAR: THE CHECHEN SOLUTION

### A. INTRODUCTION

While Russian troops withdrew in 1996 and ultimately signed a peace deal with Aslan Maskhadov (the new leader of the Chechen independence movement) in 1997, both sides clearly understood that the matter of Chechen independence remained unsettled. Russian and Chechen forces immediately began to prepare for the next confrontation. When the two sides renewed hostilities in 1999, political and military developments in the respective countries would significantly shape the next conflict.

In Chechnya, divisions amongst the various Chechen factions left Maskhadov struggling to establish a functional government. With the departure of the Russian troops many of the former rebel commanders remained reluctant to put aside their weapons and integrate with the state. Instead, many of these factions established their own micro-states and turned to criminal activity to continue funding their organizations.<sup>129</sup> Increasing traction by Wahabist Islamic groups interested in waging jihad further splintered the Chechen nationalist cause. Prominent leaders such as Ahkmed Kadyrov expressed concern over the rise of radical elements within the Chechen cause, fearing that they threatened Chechen nationalism.<sup>130</sup> However, the jihadist factions also encouraged money and fighters from throughout the Arab world, including the establishment of training camps and fortification of key defensive positions throughout the country.<sup>131</sup>

In Russia, Vladimir Putin rose from relative obscurity as Yeltsin's hand-chosen successor. Putin brought with him extensive experience in the Russian security apparatus and a strong resentment of the perceived weakness of the Russian state following the collapse of the Soviet Union.<sup>132</sup> Putin also capitalized on steadily eroding tolerance for the Chechen cause among the Russian people. As the Russian public increasingly received

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<sup>129</sup> Galeotti, *Russia's Wars in Chechnya 1994–2009*, 49.

<sup>130</sup> Kumberg, "Russian Counterinsurgency Doctrine During The Second Chechen War 1999–2009."

<sup>131</sup> Olikier, *Russia's Chechen Wars 1994–2000: Lessons from Urban Combat*, 39–40.

<sup>132</sup> Galeotti, *Russia's Wars in Chechnya 1994–2009*, 52–53.

news of the rise of criminal and jihadist networks in Chechnya, sympathy for the Chechen nationalist cause steadily waned. The Moscow apartment bombings in September of 1999 further crystallized a sense that Chechnya had spiraled out of control and required strong action from the government, extinguishing any significant sympathy remaining for the Chechen cause.<sup>133</sup>

Within the Russian Ministry of Defense, leaders identified many shortcomings of the first campaign and made modest strides in addressing (several of) them. While these efforts remained unexceptional when compared to the 2008–2016 reforms, they enabled a more competent force in the second campaign. With ample time to plan for a second invasion, the Russian military prioritized training exercises against irregular threats, renewed military sniper training programs, and invested in mountain warfare training. The five-year lull also provided time to plan for an invasion force which integrated the very best of the Russian military, resulting in less reliance on conscripts and better integration of elite units such as Spetsnaz. As a result, even though the core capabilities of the Russian Army remained nearly identical between the two campaigns, it entered Chechnya better prepared to fight the same conflict.

## **B. CAMPAIGN SUMMARY**

On October 1, 1999, Vladimir Putin formally reasserted the federal government's authority over Chechnya and the Russian military began a steady advance across the Chechen border with a force of 50,000 Armed Forces Troops and 40,000 from the MVD (Ministry of Internal Affairs).<sup>134</sup> Unlike the first campaign's hasty blitz to seize Grozny, the Russian military executed a slower and more deliberate advance, wrapping a noose around Grozny from the northern border.

Russian ground forces first entered Grozny three weeks after crossing the border in the First Chechen War. In the second campaign, the first ground forces did not attempt to enter Grozny until January 15, 2000, nearly two and a half months after the initial

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<sup>133</sup> Quentin Hodgson, "Is The Russian Bear Learning? An Operational and Tactical Analysis of the Second Chechen War, 1999–2002," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, June 4, 2010, 76.

<sup>134</sup> Hodgson, 68.

incursion.<sup>135</sup> After three weeks of urban combat, Russian forces declared Gronzy “liberated” and retained control of the city for the duration of the conflict.<sup>136</sup> At this point, the majority of Chechen *bandformirovaniya* (insurgent combat groupings) retrograded from urban centers into the rural countryside. Fierce fighting continued around rebel strongholds in the forest and mountains throughout the spring of 2000.<sup>137</sup>

However, by the following summer, rebel forces struggled to muster more than 100 fighters in a single attack or pose a significant threat to the 80,000 Russian soldiers remaining in the country.<sup>138</sup> In June of 2000, Moscow appointed Akhmad Kadyrov (a former insurgent and Chief Mufti of the former Chechen Republic turned Russian collaborator) as the interim head of government.<sup>139</sup> This decision to incorporate a former opponent marked the beginning of the Russian policy to gradually shift security responsibility Kadyrov’s forces (the *Kadyrovtsy*) as part of the broader “Chechenization” effort.<sup>140</sup> By the end of 2002, primary responsibility for the federal forces in Chechnya had transferred from the Armed Forces to the MVD (Ministry of the Interior) and by 2009 Moscow declared the “counterterrorist operation” in Chechnya over.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Galeotti, *Russia’s Wars in Chechnya 1994–2009*, 59.

<sup>136</sup> Galeotti, 60.

<sup>137</sup> Galeotti, 60–62.

<sup>138</sup> Galeotti, 60.

<sup>139</sup> Emil Souleimanov, “An Ethnography of Counterinsurgency: *Kadyrovtsy* and Russia’s Policy of Chechenization,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 31, no. 2 (March 4, 2015): 91–114, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2014.900976>.

<sup>140</sup> Chechenization refers to a concerted effort to transfer governance responsibilities in Chechnya from federal Russian control to local Chechen control. In practice this included the security forces, government administration, etc. Yuri Zhukov and Monica Toft address the efficacy of Chechenization in their 2015 article “Islamists and Nationalists.” Linguistically, the term is derived from the U.S. policy of Vietnamization (1969-1975), coined by the Nixon administration to emphasize shifting more responsibility for security to the South Vietnamese rather than highlighting the “de-americanizing” inherent in Nixon’s promised U.S. troops withdrawals. This event as well as further details of the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam were documented first hand by Henry Kissinger in his book, *Ending the Vietnam War: A History of America’s Involvement in and Extrication from the Vietnam War*.

<sup>141</sup> Galeotti, *Russia’s Wars in Chechnya 1994–2009*, 79.

### C. FORCE COMPOSITION: DON'T CALL IT A COMEBACK

The Russian force composition in the 1999 invasion consisted of a similar number of troops, and in many cases the same units as had participated in the first campaign. However, in the interim period the Russian military had undergone limited, but significant changes which would impact the course of the second campaign. The Russian forces entering Chechnya in 1999 still relied heavily on conscripts but had refined their methods of incorporating specialized troops and maintaining the morale of the conscript-heavy motorized rifle brigades.<sup>142</sup> Additionally, the invasion force more adeptly coopted several Chechen militia factions who had fought against them in the first campaign, bringing local expertise and reducing strain on Russian troops.<sup>143</sup> Some issues still haunted the expeditionary force, but the improvements tilted the balance of power enough for the Russians to claim victory.

The Russian army that entered Chechnya in 1999 included “the cream of the Russian military.”<sup>144</sup> As opposed to the hasty patchwork of units assembled in 1995, Russian military planners had spent the period since their initial loss planning and preparing the desired mix of forces for their second attempt. Elite units from across the Russian military, many with experience from the first Chechen war, were deliberately integrated into the invasion in 1999.<sup>145</sup> While motorized infantry still formed the bulk of the force, the Russian military made a deliberate attempt to limit the number of conscripts deployed to Chechnya and reinforced them with Spetsnaz and airborne units. In anticipation of the requirements in Chechnya, some 7,000 Russian troops had trained on mountain fighting techniques at training facilities in Siberia.<sup>146</sup> Thanks to a renewed training program for military marksman, the Russian ground forces entering Grozny in

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<sup>142</sup> Olikier, *Russia's Chechen Wars 1994–2000: Lessons from Urban Combat*, 59–60.

<sup>143</sup> Olikier, 43–45; Galeotti, *Russia's Wars in Chechnya 1994–2009*, 56–57.

<sup>144</sup> Olikier, *Russia's Chechen Wars 1994–2000: Lessons from Urban Combat*, 59.

<sup>145</sup> Olikier, 60.

<sup>146</sup> Hodgson, “Is The Russian Bear Learning? An Operational and Tactical Analysis of the Second Chechen War, 1999–2002,” <https://www-tandfonline-com.libproxy.nps.edu/doi/abs/10.1080/01402390412331302985>, 70.



1999 benefited from the support of over 200 trained snipers who infiltrated the city in advance to support the advancing troops and serve as artillery spotters.<sup>147</sup>

Russian forces in the second Chechen war also benefitted from a much more robust and integrated pro-Russian Chechen militia. Early in the conflict, several Chechen factions defected to the Russians and immediately integrated their militias with the Russian ground campaign. While one can debate to what extent these defections reflected Russian cunning vs. increasing division among the Chechens, the early incorporation of these indigenous forces gave the Russians a significant advantage. During the initial press south from the Chechen border, whole towns surrendered without a fight based on the urging of local militia leaders. Following the success of the initial invasion, when Russian forces conducted “sweeps” to root out rebel activity, their operations proved significantly more effective when augmented by these local militia forces.<sup>148</sup> These same local forces would eventually integrate with embedded Russian GRU units to form the *Vostok* and *Zapad* brigades, providing Russia with proxies in the country until as late as 2008.<sup>149</sup>

During the siege of Grozny, the Russian attack relied upon a loyalist Chechen militia led by a former mayor of the city, Bislan Gantamirov. Gantamirov’s militia, backed by Russian Spetsnaz, led a series of offensive thrusts to secure key strongpoints in the city, enabling the follow-on attacks by motorized rifle troops.<sup>150</sup> Most notably, the Chechen Republic’s chief mufti, Kadyrov, defected in the opening days of the conflict, bringing with him his own ferociously loyal followers, the *Kadyrovtsi*. As Russian forces secured their hold on the country in 2000, Kadyrov would become Moscow’s chosen strongman to keep a lid on future tensions. Through this adept cooption of local militia as well as better preparing and employing the forces available, the Russian CIW force performed

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<sup>147</sup> Hodgson, 71.

<sup>148</sup> Lyall, “Are Coethnics More Effective Counterinsurgents?”

<sup>149</sup> Claire Bigg, “Vostok Battalion, A Powerful New Player In Eastern Ukraine,” RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, accessed September 4, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/vostok-battalion-a-powerful-new-player-in-eastern-ukraine/25404785.html>.

<sup>150</sup> Olikier, *Russia’s Chechen Wars 1994–2000: Lessons from Urban Combat*, 43–44.

remarkably better than their predecessors only five years earlier, despite the lack of structural reforms.

#### **D. RUSSIAN FIRES: DRAINING THE SEA WITH HIGH EXPLOSIVES<sup>151</sup>**

Recalling the difficulties of urban combat from the First Chechen War, the Russian military entered the second conflict with a deliberate plan for avoiding fighting on city streets as much as possible. During the previous conflict, Chechen rebels had wreaked havoc upon Russian conscripts at close range, where experienced Chechen fighters shattered the loose unit cohesion of Russian conscripts.<sup>152</sup> The Chechens, understanding their advantages in close quarters, had deliberately sought close combat with the Russians, limiting the effectiveness of Russian air or artillery support.<sup>153</sup>

This time, Russian troops would advance into urban areas until they encountered resistance and then withdraw, using massed artillery or air support regardless of civilian casualties and collateral damage. While Russian commanders had shown little hesitance to employ massed fire support in the first campaign, they doubled down on this approach in 1999. By employing artillery and air support more liberally, the Russian military sought to both destroy the fighters and the cover that provided them haven. This would limit Russian casualties and prevent Russians from engaging in close quarters battle where Chechen rebels had excelled against the poorly trained and motivated Russian conscripts in 1995.<sup>154</sup>

In support of this renewed emphasis on fires integration, the Russian military incorporated planning and training on artillery fire missions last seen during the

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<sup>151</sup> “The guerilla must move amongst the people as a fish swims in the sea.” Mao Tse-Tung, *On Guerilla Warfare* (New York, NY.: Praeger, 1961), 93.

<sup>152</sup> Lester Grau, “Technology and the Second Chechen Campaign: Not All New and Not That Much,” 2009, [https://community.apan.org/cfs-file/\\_key/docpreview-s/00-00-08-52-42/2000\\_2D00\\_09\\_2D00\\_01-Technology-and-the-Second-Chechen-Campaign-\\_2800\\_Grau\\_2900\\_.pdf](https://community.apan.org/cfs-file/_key/docpreview-s/00-00-08-52-42/2000_2D00_09_2D00_01-Technology-and-the-Second-Chechen-Campaign-_2800_Grau_2900_.pdf).

<sup>153</sup> Olikier, *Russia’s Chechen Wars 1994–2000: Lessons from Urban Combat*, 20.

<sup>154</sup> Grau, “Technology and the Second Chechen Campaign: Not All New and Not That Much,” 1–2.

Afghanistan conflict such as sweep and zone.<sup>155</sup> While these same techniques had been leveraged in Afghanistan less than a decade earlier, they had never been incorporated into formal training or doctrine and were therefore absent in the First Chechen War.<sup>156</sup> To enable more effective support of the ground force's maneuver, Russian planners attached significant portions of their artillery assets directly their supported maneuver elements.<sup>157</sup> While some artillery support remained at the brigade or division level, much of the artillery remained at the battalion level or below with artillery battalions directly supporting maneuver battalions and artillery batteries in direct support to maneuver companies.<sup>158</sup>

Thermobaric munitions aided the effectiveness of artillery and air support when conventional munitions failed to eject Chechen rebels from the dense urban centers such as Grozny, or the mountains to the south.<sup>159</sup> The overpressure produced by these munitions in closed environments (caves, bunkers, and buildings) proved especially effective at destroying the structures.<sup>160</sup> The Russian General Staff briefly considered using chemical weapons to achieve this same effect, but political leadership reportedly vetoed this option.<sup>161</sup> Ultimately ground-launched thermobaric munitions were authorized for use in

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<sup>155</sup> Grau, 2. "Sweep and zone fires provide a method for the attack of large or irregularly shaped targets. The advantage of sweep and zone fires is the ease with which they may be computed in comparison to attacking the target by using special corrections. The disadvantages are the great quantity of ammunition that must be expended, and the time required to do so." (Department of the Army, *Field Artillery Manual Cannon Gunnery*).

<sup>156</sup> Grau, 1.

<sup>157</sup> Hodgson, "Is The Russian Bear Learning? An Operational and Tactical Analysis of the Second Chechen War, 1999–2002," 73.

<sup>158</sup> Grau, "Technology and the Second Chechen Campaign: Not All New and Not That Much," 2.

<sup>159</sup> "Thermobaric munitions are those munitions that, by design produce more heat and overpressure than conventional explosives by exploding a vapor in the blast zone. Their main use initially was in airborne fuel-air explosive bombs. Whilst the United States has concentrated on airborne weapons, Russia has produced thermobaric weapons and warheads, from airborne bombs to rifle grenades." Additional information on the history and medical effects of thermobaric munitions (to include the above quote) can be found in David Anders article. "Thermobaric Munitions and Their Medical Effects," published in the *Australian Military Medicine*.

<sup>160</sup> Olikier, *Russia's Chechen Wars 1994–2000: Lessons from Urban Combat*, 26.

<sup>161</sup> Grau, "Technology and the Second Chechen Campaign: Not All New and Not That Much," 4.

Grozny, while air delivered thermobaric munitions were authorized outside of city centers.<sup>162</sup>

The rules of engagement surrounding thermobaric munitions also highlights a consistent disconnect between the talking points emerging from Moscow and the reality on the ground. While Moscow may have insisted no conscripts would take part in the second campaign and that aircraft would not bomb within three kilometers of cities or towns, reporting on the ground clearly contradicted these statements.<sup>163</sup> It remains unclear whether this was due to a legitimate disconnect between Moscow and the reality in Chechnya, or if this rhetoric was never intended to reach anyone beyond the domestic and international press.<sup>164</sup>

#### **E. TECHNOLOGICAL INTEGRATION**

The short interlude between the first and second Chechen wars did not provide much opportunity for the Russian military to enact large scale reforms or modernization. However, it did provide ample time for military planners to consider how they would approach the conflict differently when the two sides came to blows.

The haphazard nature of the first Chechen campaign left intelligence preparations woefully inadequate. Lacking even the most basic maps, ground forces commanders rarely understood the layouts of the streets in which they were fighting, much less the locations of enemy strongpoints. During the second campaign, both planners and ground force commanders possessed detailed maps of the battlefield. These included maps of the sewage

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<sup>162</sup> Grau, 4.

<sup>163</sup> Oliker, *Russia's Chechen Wars 1994–2000: Lessons from Urban Combat*, 59; Hodgson, “Is The Russian Bear Learning? An Operational and Tactical Analysis of the Second Chechen War, 1999–2002,” 72.

<sup>164</sup> Jason Lyall makes the counterintuitive argument that Russian indiscriminate shelling against villages in the middle portion of the war (2000-2005) effectively suppressed rebel attacks compared to villages that were not shelled. Specifically, he observed a 24% reduction in rebel attacks surrounding villages which had been shelled when compared to similar villages which had not been shelled. Jason Lyall, “Does Indiscriminate Violence Incite Insurgent Attacks? Evidence from Chechnya,” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 53, no. 3 (2009): 331–62.

and communications systems in urban areas.<sup>165</sup> In another contrast with the First Chechen War, Antonov An-30 (“Clank”) aerial reconnaissance sorties provided ground forces with regular aerial photographs of Chechen rebel positions on the ground.<sup>166</sup>

While most improvements in the Russian military emerged from using the tools available in the previous conflict more effectively, the introduction of new electronic warfare (EW) assets provided updated capabilities to commanders on the ground. Equipment such as the experimental Arbalet-M radio-locational system allowed Russian forces to pinpoint enemy positions in the rural countryside and mountains.<sup>167</sup> These systems integrated with newly fielded electronic warfare units to identify and pinpoint Chechen transmissions, allowing them to be jammed, physically destroyed, or intercepted with the assistance of a small team of translators.

When combined with improved communications, these developments allowed Russians to occasionally execute sophisticated deception operations. In at least one case, Russian forces used false communications to convince rebels to attempt a retreat through what they believed would be a safe escape route from Grozny under the cover of night. In fact, the retreating rebels found themselves ensnared in a pre-established minefield, resulting in high casualties.<sup>168</sup> In another case, Russians transmitted false information of an impending attack so that they could ambush troops moving to reinforce defensive positions.<sup>169</sup>

## F. CONCLUSION

The Russian military owed much of its tactical and operational success in the Second Chechen War not to major structural reforms or modernization, but to a recognition that it could employ its existing force structure and capabilities more effectively. Rather

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<sup>165</sup> Hodgson, “Is The Russian Bear Learning? An Operational and Tactical Analysis of the Second Chechen War, 1999–2002,” 71.

<sup>166</sup> Hodgson, 71.

<sup>167</sup> Olikier, *Russia’s Chechen Wars 1994–2000: Lessons from Urban Combat*, 52.

<sup>168</sup> Hodgson, “Is The Russian Bear Learning? An Operational and Tactical Analysis of the Second Chechen War, 1999–2002,” 75.

<sup>169</sup> Olikier, *Russia’s Chechen Wars 1994–2000: Lessons from Urban Combat*, 52.

than the haphazard invasion of 1994, the 1999 military campaign to reassert Russian control of Chechnya represented the culmination of five years of planning and training for how to better defeat the Chechen guerillas. By leveraging more elite units to spearhead offensive thrusts, coopting local militias, liberally applying massed indirect fires, and better incorporating readily available technology, the Russian military managed to achieve a significantly better outcome by simply changing how it applied the tools in its inventory. At the time of this writing, Chechnya remains firmly under the control of Moscow with Ramzan Kadyrov, son of Ahkmed Kadyrov serving as Moscow's anointed strongman.

Chechnya is still a deeply troubled region as of 2021. Waves of horrific human rights violations perpetuated by the Russian military, Chechen rebels, and the current Kadyrov regime have left an enduring mark on the population. An estimated half of the Chechen population lived as a refugee at some point during the period from 1989–2009 and estimates range between 10 to 25% of the population perished. During the fighting, both sides allegedly frequently engaged in looting, rape, torture, and summary execution of civilians. The Moscow-supported Kadyrov regime has been characterized by Human Rights Watch as “brutal” and “ruthless” in its abuse of critics.<sup>170</sup> However, through its continued policy of “Chechenization,” Moscow has successfully retained control of the breakaway republic, with the added benefit of distancing itself from the repressive tactics of the Kadyrov regime.

Beyond the brutality and instability, the Kadyrov regime also continues to pose a political dilemma for Moscow. Between 2001–2016, Moscow provided Chechnya with at least 14 billion dollars in reconstruction assistance, prompting protests in Moscow and calls

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<sup>170</sup> Kyle Knight and Tanya Lokshina, “Video Demonstrates Chechnya Leadership’s Brutality,” *Human Rights Watch* (blog), September 10, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/09/10/video-demonstrates-chechnya-leaderships-brutality>; Tanya Lokshina, “Kremlin Endorses Another Term for Kadyrov and His Brutal Chechen Regime,” *Human Rights Watch* (blog), June 24, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/06/24/kremlin-endorses-another-term-kadyrov-and-his-brutal-chechen-regime>.

to sever ties with the republic.<sup>171</sup> As late as 2017, 80 percent of Chechnya’s annual budget came from Moscow.<sup>172</sup> Meanwhile, Ramzan Kadyrov has consolidated power within the republic to an extent reminiscent of Putin’s hold on Russia, accumulating significant autonomy in the process.<sup>173</sup> As described by Anna Politkovskaya, the situation in Chechnya resembles “an old story, repeated many times in our history: the Kremlin fosters a baby dragon, which it then has to keep feeding to stop him from setting everything on fire.”<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> Joshua Yaffa, “Ramzan Kadyrov, the Putin of Chechnya,” *The New Yorker*, accessed October 28, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/02/08/putins-dragon>; Michael Schwirtz, “Russian Anger Grows Over Chechnya Subsidies,” *The New York Times*, October 8, 2011, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/09/world/europe/chechnyas-costs-stir-anger-as-russia-approaches-elections.html>.

<sup>172</sup> Liz Fuller, “Analysis: Kadyrov’s Chechnya Appears Exempt From Russian Funding Cuts,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 11:04:02Z, sec. Caucasus Report, <https://www.rferl.org/a/caucasus-report-kadyrov-chechnya-exempt-funding-cuts/28648698.html>.

<sup>173</sup> Emil Aslan Souleimanov and Grazvydas Jasutis, “The Dynamics of Kadyrov’s Regime: Between Autonomy and Dependence,” *Caucasus Survey* 4, no. 2 (May 3, 2016): 115–28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23761199.2016.1183396>.

<sup>174</sup> Yaffa, “Ramzan Kadyrov, the Putin of Chechnya.”

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## VI. 2008: THE PIVOT POINT OF THE GEORGIAN WAR

We was rotten 'fore we started—we was never *disciplined*;  
We made it out a favour if an order was obeyed.  
Yes, every little drummer 'ad 'is rights an' wrongs to mind,  
So we had to pay for teachin'—an' we paid!

—Rudyard Kipling<sup>175</sup>

### A. INTRODUCTION

In August of 2008, a combination of strategic and cultural tensions between Russia and Georgia boiled over into a Russian invasion of the Georgian region of South Ossetia. Over twelve days of sustained combined arms combat, Russian forces drove back Georgian opponents in what appeared to be a Russian victory. Despite the objective success of the campaign, it revealed a startlingly unprepared Russian military. By all accounts, the Russian military complex strained to conduct a simple and well anticipated operation against an inferior force just across its own border. While not an example of Counter Irregular Warfare (CIW), Russia's struggles in the Georgian War catalyzed a series of watershed military reforms which laid the foundation for a different approach to subsequent CIW campaigns.

Mixed results in the Second Chechen War (1999 – 2009) demonstrated a need for dramatic military reforms. Unfortunately for reform-minded individuals in the Russian MoD, a lack of clear priorities and resistance from the military bureaucracy handicapped this process.<sup>176</sup> The Russian MoD remained torn between investments in the conventional, large-scale warfighting capabilities envisioned for a clash with NATO and the more likely reality of continued CIW campaigns in the North Caucasus and Central Asia. The Georgian War settled the debate. Within the political and military leadership, the conflict generated enough consensus to move forward with structural changes. This chapter will focus on the

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<sup>175</sup> Rudyard Kipling, *That Day*, 1922, Song, 1922, <https://www.bartleby.com/364/231.html>.

<sup>176</sup> Oslo Baev, "Putin's Vision and Plans for Modernizing the Russian Military: Counter-Terrorism and Power-Projection," Oslo Peace Project (PRIO), 2005, <https://www.prio.org/Projects/Project/?x=1325>.

impacts of these reforms to the key trends in Russian CIW: The transition to a more flexible expeditionary force composition, the increased integration of precision fires, and the steady drive to replace outdated Soviet-legacy systems with modern technology at the tactical and operational levels. Changes in the reform period directly contributed to the capabilities on display during Russia's CIW campaign in Syria circa 2015.

## **B. SUMMARY OF THE CAMPAIGN**

The Georgian War of 2008 was a frozen conflict that flared hot after 15 years of relative peace. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, in 1991, the Republic of Georgia declared its independence. In 1992, pro-Russian minorities in north Georgian provinces—Abkhazia and South Ossetia—declared their independence.<sup>177</sup> Earlier in 2008, attempts by Kosovo to recognize its independence from Serbia combined with NATO rhetoric about the potential for Georgia to gain membership to add additional tension to the situation. The Russian response to this slight against their ally Serbia was a veiled threat: “The declaration and recognition of Kosovar independence will make Russia adjust its line toward Abkhazia and South Ossetia.”<sup>178</sup> While the Balkans remained too contentious for aggressive Russian reaction to Kosovar independence, Abkhazia and South Ossetia provided the Kremlin a way to message their discontent with NATO expansion. The tinderbox was full and waiting for a spark.

On 7 August 2008, after several days of sporadic armed exchanges between Ossetian separatists and Georgian forces, Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili authorized Georgian troops to cross into South Ossetia. Russian forces, which had quietly infiltrated the area over the preceding weeks, responded immediately, and conventional combined arms combat erupted (see Figure 5).<sup>179</sup> An estimated 40,000 Russian troops supported by tanks and artillery maneuvered through South Ossetia. These forces,

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<sup>177</sup> British Broadcasting Company, “South Ossetia Profile,” *BBC News*, April 21, 2016, sec. Europe, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-18269210>.

<sup>178</sup> C.J. Chivers, “Russia Warns It May Back Breakaway Republics in Georgia - The New York Times,” *New York Times*, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/16/world/europe/16breakaway.html>.

<sup>179</sup> Cable News Network, “2008 Georgia-Russia Conflict Fast Facts,” CNN Editorial Research, accessed August 4, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2014/03/13/world/europe/2008-georgia-russia-conflict/index.html>.

combined with air interdiction by the *Voyenno-vozdushnye Sily* (Russian Air Force), inflicted heavy casualties on the Georgian army.



Figure 5. Russian Forces Marching on Tshkinvali, August 2008<sup>180</sup>

By 13 August, 2008, the outside world’s perception was that Russia had succeeded in securing Abkhazian and South Ossetian independence and squarely beaten their Georgian opponents (see Figure 6). Headlines declared that a resurgent Russia had “smashed” the Georgian army and sent “a strong message to the West.”<sup>181</sup> President George H. W. Bush issued a call for humanitarian relief to the region and a stern warning

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<sup>180</sup> Source: Sophiko Megreldze, “Europe’s Court Condemns Russia over 2008 War With Georgia,” AP News, April 20, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/europe-georgia-salome-zurabishvili-moscow-russia-854c37a67adc9cda0920a00e931efc09>.

<sup>181</sup> Ralph Boulton, “Russia Smashes Georgian Army, Sends NATO Message,” *Reuters*, August 19, 2008, sec. Earnings, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-georgia-ossetia-military-idUSMCH95141120080819>.

to the Russian Federation, the clear victor of the conflict, to not interfere with the aid.<sup>182</sup> Although the Russian Federation had secured its strategic objectives of stymying Georgian reunification, on a tactical and operational level the war proved an embarrassment to the Russian Federation and a catalyst for drastic military reforms.<sup>183</sup>

The Russian military's poor performance in Georgia contrasted starkly with their strategic success. Among senior leadership in Moscow it was clear that Russia had emerged victorious despite the military's performance, rather than due to it. Even with 203 divisions available for service (on paper), the Russian military could only field 90,000 troops on the eve of the Russo Georgian operation.<sup>184</sup> As Vladimir Putin assessed shortly after taking office in 2000, "The Army has 1.4 million men, but no one to wage war."<sup>185</sup> Communications systems remained outdated and incompatible, preventing effective command and control or use of Close Air Support (CAS). At one point, the commander of the 58<sup>th</sup> Army, Lieutenant General Anatoliy Khrulev resorted to borrowing a satellite phone from a journalist to contact his troops.<sup>186</sup> Whereas the Georgian Army had invested heavily in modernization efforts, the Russian Army was shown to be woefully unprepared with 80% of their equipment assessed as outdated at the start of the conflict. Despite achieving their military objectives, the Russian MoD could not deny the embarrassing performance directly tied to a lack of institutional, technological, and doctrinal modernization. Russia was fighting 21<sup>st</sup> century wars with a Cold War military.

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<sup>182</sup> George Bush, "President Bush Discusses Situation in Georgia, Urges Russia to Cease Military Operations," White House Archives, August 13, 2008, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2008/08/20080813.html>.

<sup>183</sup> Ariel Cohen and Robert E. Hamilton, *The Russian Military and the Georgia War: Lessons and Implications* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2011). 49

<sup>184</sup> Athena Bryce-Rogers, "Russian Military Reform in the Aftermath of the 2008 Russia-Georgia War," *Demokratizatsiya* 21, no. 3 (Summer 2013): 339–68. 341.

<sup>185</sup> Bryce-Rogers. 339.

<sup>186</sup> Cohen and Hamilton, *The Russian Military and the Georgia War*.



Figure 6. Map of Russian Advances Into Georgia, 12 August 2008<sup>187</sup>

### C. A CALL FOR ACTION

The tactical inadequacies of the Georgian War sparked a focused review and transformation of the Russian military. In the years immediately following the Georgian War, there was an outpouring of self-reflective literature within Russian military circles, all trying to answer the question, “How does the Russian Army modernize?”<sup>188</sup> This debate ran the gamut from technological innovation to reforming and adapting the educational paradigm for

<sup>187</sup> Source: University of Texas at Austin, “Georgia War 2008 - Perry-Castañeda Map Collection - UT Library Online,” Archive, Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection, August 12, 2008, [https://maps.lib.utexas.edu/maps/georgia\\_war\\_2008.html](https://maps.lib.utexas.edu/maps/georgia_war_2008.html).

<sup>188</sup> Sergei Pavlovich Polyakov. “Модернизация педагогической системы подготовки молодежи к военной службе в Российской Федерации [Modernization of the pedagogical training system for military service in the Russian Federation].” (Graduate Thesis. Military University of the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, 2010). <https://dissercat.com/content/modernizatsiya-pedagogicheskoi-sistemy-podgotovki-molodezhi-k-voennoi-sluzhbe-v-rossiiskoi-f>.

officers.<sup>189</sup> Eventually, the influence of the executive branch coalesced with assessments by the Russian General Staff and training commands to produce a way ahead. President Medvedev began transforming the Russian Army away from the Soviet model and towards a more agile, modular force. The administration applied the economic windfall of the preceding Putin term to modernization programs, increasing military spending to its highest levels since the fall of the Soviet Union.<sup>190</sup> Although the Georgian War was not a CIW fight, it drove reform in force composition that affects Russia's current CIW posture.

#### **D. FROM CONSCRIPTS TO CONTRACTS (AND EXPEDITIONARY BRIGADES)**

Key issues highlighted by the conflict were the need for more contracted volunteers (*kontraktniki*),<sup>191</sup> and the lack of a proper expeditionary arm due to over-reliance on the cadre system.<sup>192</sup> The cadre system inherently sacrifices readiness for mass and, despite the relatively small scale of operations in Georgia, Russian commanders found themselves once against scrambling to assemble ready forces by cannibalizing large partially manned units to form small units prepared to fight (see Figure 7). The army's ability to mass-mobilize relied upon a nationwide system of conscription. Conscripts (*prizivniki*) were led by a small core of professional soldiers serving as officers and warrant officers (*praporshiki*). While this system enabled the Russian General Staff to mobilize the sizeable formations necessary to contend with a force like NATO, it was not a recipe for deployable CIW packages. Many Russian units remained manned by a small crew of officers, with the intent to flex conscripts as needed to serve at full strength while avoiding the maintenance of a large standing army. This practice resulted in "paper divisions," a bloated officer corps, and a lack of trained professionals across

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<sup>189</sup> A.P. Abramov, and G.I. Osadchaya. "Социокультурный подход к проблеме модернизации среднего специализированного военного образования [Sociocultural Approach to the Problem of Modernization of Secondary Specialized Military Education]." *Известия Юго-Западного Государственного Университета. Серия: Экономика. Социология. Менеджмент [Proceedings of the Southwest State University, Series: Economy, Sociology, Management]*, no. 2 (19) (2016). <https://elibrary.ru/item.asp?id=26740026>

<sup>190</sup> Statista Research Department. "Russian Military Expenditure: 1993–2019." Statista. Accessed August 4, 2021. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1203160/military-expenditure-russia/>.

<sup>191</sup> Cohen and Hamilton, *The Russian Military and the Georgia War*. 68

<sup>192</sup> Cohen and Hamilton. 69



the formation.<sup>193</sup> The push after 2008 to increase volunteer enlistments and abolish the cadre system set conditions for creating expeditionary CIW packages within the Russian military.

Another factor that played a significant part in the force's composition was the system of *dedovshina*, "grandfathering." Brutal hazing within the enlisted ranks—a counter-intuitive point of pride in the conscript formations—served as a disincentive to service, hampering Russian ability to bring in *kontraktniki*.<sup>194</sup> The scandalous abuse of private Andrei Svychov, a conscript, in 2006 highlighted the level of brutality within the Russian army. The wounds inflicted by Svychov's comrades ultimately resulted in the amputation of his legs and genitals.<sup>195</sup> Conversations with Russian draft-dodgers in 2008 revealed their perception of a term of service as analogous to a federal prison sentence in the United States.<sup>196</sup> This culture of hazing, combined with sub-standard living conditions, limited the feasibility of maintaining an all-volunteer (or even mostly volunteer) force package required to conduct expeditionary operations without mobilizing Russian conscripts. While the need to mobilize conscripts may not have prevented expeditionary operations, the mobilization process relied on adequate time to prepare before beginning operations and increased the level of domestic scrutiny for the operation.

In the aftermath of the Georgian War, the Russian military increased the authorization for numbers of *kontraktniki*. Less than one year after the cessation of hostilities, the Kremlin announced the removal of over 500 general officer positions within the military.<sup>197</sup> The MoD introduced housing allowances as an alternative to sub-standard military housing. The

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<sup>193</sup> "Paper divisions" in this case refers to the manning of units below the threshold required for them to engage in combat operations. In theory, these units would be made ready for combat by filling their ranks with conscripts during mobilization. In practice, the Russian General Staff learned that it often could not afford to wait for mobilization and resorted to cannibalizing these units to form the elements required for operations.

<sup>194</sup> Dale Herspring, "Dedovshchina in the Russian Army: The Problem That Won't Go Away," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 18, no. 4 (n.d.): 607–29.

<sup>195</sup> Steven Myers, "Hazing Trial Bares Dark Side of Russia's Military," *New York Times*, 2006, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/13/world/europe/13hazing.html>.

<sup>196</sup> Sergei (Last name unknown). conversation with author, Saint Petersburg State University (SPGU), June, 2008

<sup>197</sup> Interfax. "В Российской Армии Сократили Полтысячи Генеральских Должностей." [Half a thousand general positions were cut in the Russian army]. Interfax.ru, December 21, 2009. <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/115903>.

“Committee for Soldiers’ Mothers,” a non-governmental organization dedicated to eradicating *dedovshina*, also gained traction in the public eye.<sup>198</sup> The Russian MoD revamped marketing by investing in a series of high-quality recruitment videos with the slogan “*Sluzhba po kontraktu*,” service under contract.<sup>199</sup> An emphasis on deployability and readiness resulted in the conversion of Russia’s 203 divisions to 83 brigades, with the intent for each brigade to maintain “permanent readiness.”<sup>200</sup> This same momentum resulted in an increased focus on SOF—a noticeable trend in post-Georgian CIW operations.<sup>201</sup>



Figure 7. Russian Soldiers Manning Roadblocks Near Gori, August 2008<sup>202</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> Useful Channel. “6-Летняя По Контракту Служба Дает Право На Покупку Квартиры.” [Six years of contracted service gives the right to purchase apartments]. Accessed August 4, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sfLXgdCE-bE>

<sup>199</sup> R.Z.A. Altair. “Служба По Контракту Реклама 2014” [Advertisement, service under contract], 2014. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1gTh2Qi3I\\_M](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1gTh2Qi3I_M).

<sup>200</sup> Rod Thornton, *Military Modernization and the Russian Ground Forces* (Carlisle, PA: Army War College, 2011), 22–24.

<sup>201</sup> Lionel Beehner et al., “Analyzing the Russian Way of War,” 2008, 98.

<sup>202</sup> Source: Megreldze, “Europe’s Court Condemns Russia over 2008 War With Georgia.”



## E. JOINT FIRES (DIS)INTEGRATION

Failures in Russian fire support during the Georgian War also laid the groundwork for increased CIW capability following the post-war reforms. The realization that the Russian military still could not accurately employ fires in direct support of maneuvering ground forces proved one of the most damning realizations of the campaign. A lack of precision guided munitions (PGMs) significantly hampered Russian fires in Georgia. When laser-guided surface to surface munitions were available, the broken terrain and foliage prevented line of sight acquisition and designation.<sup>203</sup> In the preceding years, the Russian military had developed the *Santimetr*, *Krasnopol*, *Smelchak*, and *Gran* laser munitions, but they had no significant impact on the battlefield.<sup>204</sup> Forced by the tempo of the campaign, Russian artillery units continued to provide relatively timely if not accurate fires to support the ground forces maneuvering south.

Russian close air support (CAS) sorties proved even less successful than the mixed results of artillery support. As highlighted by Michael Kofman, “the air battle and air defense battle were like two drunken boxers. Russia’s air force was ineffective at suppressing Georgian air defenses, and Georgian air defenses were ineffective at suppressing the Russian air force.”<sup>205</sup> Of the six Russian planes lost in the Georgian War, only two were likely shot down by Georgian air defenses while the rest were apparently lost to friendly fire or maintenance issues.<sup>206</sup> Whereas artillery units at least effectively integrated with their supported maneuver elements, CAS sorties had neither precision-guided munitions nor interoperable communications.<sup>207</sup> This lack of communication resulted in a preponderance of air assets focusing on air interdiction missions south of the

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<sup>203</sup> Carolina Vendil Pallin and Fredrik Westerlund, “Russia’s War in Georgia: Lessons and Consequences,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 20, no. 2 (June 2009): 400–424, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592310902975539>. (41)

<sup>204</sup> Vendil Pallin and Westerlund. (41)

<sup>205</sup> Michael Kofman, “Russian Performance in the Russo-Georgian War Revisited,” *War on the Rocks*, September 4, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/09/russian-performance-in-the-russo-georgian-war-revisited/>.

<sup>206</sup> Kofman.

<sup>207</sup> Cohen and Hamilton, *The Russian Military and the Georgia War*.72

Georgian/Ossetian border. Even these missions, reduced in complexity due to physical separation from the front lines, resulted in airstrikes on civilian targets, including hospitals. Inability to synchronize and communicate at a tactical level resulted in friendly fire incidents, such as the MANPADS shoot-down of an SU24 fighter-bomber by Russian maneuver forces marching through Tshkinvali.<sup>208</sup> As a result of the relative failure of Russian CAS, the Russian MoD identified improving the ability to deconflict air sorties with troops on the ground and the integration of PGMs for major reforms. Notably, the high numbers of civilian casualties did not appear to impact Russian decision-making.

## F. TECHNOLOGICAL INTEGRATION

As the Georgian War began, U.S. forces in Iraq and Afghanistan entered their 5th and 7<sup>th</sup> year of combat, respectively. The Iraqi insurgency had catalyzed rapid technological advancements among Western militaries.<sup>209</sup> U.S. counter-insurgency forces regularly used armed unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to execute complete targeting cycles against insurgent forces.<sup>210</sup> The mass adoption of the Blue Force Tracker system provided U.S. Commanders the capability to digitally track their forces in real-time.<sup>211</sup> Meanwhile, the Russian ground forces remained anchored to equipment that would have appeared antiquated to U.S. forces participating in the 1991 Gulf War.

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<sup>208</sup> Ruslan Pukhov, *The Tanks of August* (Moscow, Russia: Centre for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, 2010), 103.

<sup>209</sup> This does not mean that the U.S. military industrial complex writ large had pivoted away from legacy systems. Rather, although many legacy systems were retained (e.g. A-10 Thunderbolt, AH-64 Apache, M1 Abrams), examples of rapid production or adaptation during the Global War on Terror (GWOT) abound. These include but are not limited to the movement of the naval Phalanx system onto land (*Interesting Engineering Magazine* online, “C-RAM, An Advanced Automated Point-Defense Gatling Gun”), the development of the Lightweight Counter-Mortar Radar (US Army Acquisitions Center online, “AN/TPQ-50 Lightweight Counter Mortar Radar”), and the mass incorporation of UAVs into military operations (*New York Times*, “US Drones Crowd Iraq’s Skies to Fight Insurgents”).

<sup>210</sup> Associated Press, “Military Relying More on Drones: Mostly in Iraq,” News, National Broadcasting Channel, 2008, <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna22463596>.

<sup>211</sup> Timothy L Rider, “Blue Force Tracking to Expand Across Force,” *Army AL&T*, no. September-October (2004): 4.

Russian forces in the Georgian War found themselves regularly technologically overmatched by an army with less than one-sixtieth of the Russian defense budget.<sup>212</sup> On the ground, Russian forces fighting in Ossetia suffered tactical defeats directly attributed to inferior equipment as they clashed with Georgian mechanized elements sporting “reactive armor, night vision equipment, advanced radios, and superior fire control systems.”<sup>213</sup> At the individual level, Russian soldiers reportedly stripped dead Georgians for their better equipment and body armor.<sup>214</sup> Inadequate maintenance and logistical support resulted in broken-down Russian vehicles clogging crucial roads. An estimated 60% of Russian vehicles broke down during the campaign.<sup>215</sup> These inadequacies combined to hamstring Russian forces at the tactical level, where “in direct fire engagements between Russian and Georgian units of relatively equal size, Georgian forces seem to have inflicted more damage than they suffered.”<sup>216</sup>

In the aftermath of the Georgian War, the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) made deliberate decisions to prevent facing technological overmatch in the future. Failures in reconnaissance were addressed in 2010, when the MoD signed a \$400 million (USD) procurement plan with the Israeli Aerospace Industries to provide unmanned aerial vehicles to the Russian military.<sup>217</sup> Vehicles were overhauled and upgraded. Russian Research & Development elements began assessing the economic feasibility of increasing the Russian military’s capacity to incorporate PGMs and improving avionics to gain a night CAS capability. The Georgian War highlighted shortfalls in Russia’s lagging technology, which altered Russia’s ability to execute CIW when remedied.

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<sup>212</sup> Trading Economics, “Georgia Military Expenditure 1996–2020,” Trading Economics, 2021, <https://tradingeconomics.com/georgia/military-expenditure>.

<sup>213</sup> Cohen and Hamilton, *The Russian Military and the Georgia War*.

<sup>214</sup> Cohen and Hamilton. 70

<sup>215</sup> Cohen and Hamilton. 70

<sup>216</sup> Cohen and Hamilton, 28.

<sup>217</sup> Haaretz, “Israel Signs \$400 Million Deal to Sell Spy Drones to Russia,” News, Haaretz, October 14, 2021, <https://www.haaretz.com/1.5125231>.

## G. CONCLUSION

The Georgian War catalyzed changes within the Russian MoD that continue to define the Russia CIW approach. Although a strategic victory, it revealed a series of tactical shortfalls. In 2009 President Medvedev highlighted the trajectory of military reforms to include: “bringing all combat formations to permanent readiness status (i.e., elimination of cadre units); raising the effectiveness of command-and-control systems (technological investments); and upgrading equipment with a focus on PGMs (fires integration).”<sup>218</sup> All reflected deficiencies from the Georgian War. Echoing the president’s priorities, the commander of the RF equivalent of TRADOC described the Georgian War as a failure of interoperability between ground and air forces, poor communications, and ineffective reconnaissance and UAVs.<sup>219</sup> The momentum of reforms following the Georgian War would prove essential in providing the Russian military with a modular and capable CIW capability in Syria.

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<sup>218</sup> Cohen and Hamilton, *The Russian Military and the Georgia War*. 71

<sup>218</sup> Cohen and Hamilton. 80

<sup>219</sup> Cohen and Hamilton, *The Russian Military and the Georgia War*. 80

## VII. SYRIA: THE NEW MODEL ARMY<sup>220</sup>

When a nation re-awakens, its finest sons are prepared to give their lives for its liberation. When empires are threatened with collapse, they are prepared to sacrifice their non-commissioned officers.

—Menachem Begin, 1951<sup>221</sup>

### A. INTRODUCTION

In early October 2015, U.S. President Obama warned that Russian intervention on behalf of the crumbling Assad regime in Syria would “just get them stuck in a quagmire and it won’t work.”<sup>222</sup> This was not an uncommon sentiment at the time.<sup>223</sup> Under siege by both ISIS and multiple rebel factions, many predicted Bashar al-Assad’s days were numbered.<sup>224</sup>

Moscow made a different calculation, opting to intervene to project power in the region and secure their warm water port at Latakia. Rather than being sucked into a quagmire, Russia successfully stabilized a friendly regime while securing a prominent

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<sup>220</sup> This is a deliberate reference to Oliver Cromwell’s stringent military reforms of Parliamentary forces during the English Civil War, creating the “New Model Army.” More pertinently, in 2004, then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld published an opinion article in the *Wall Street Journal* titled “New Model Army.” In this piece, Secretary Rumsfeld argued for continued modularization of the existing DOD force structure and increased reliance on civilian contractors. The Russian contingent in Syria represented a similar watershed in the development of expeditionary CIW force packages. For a detailed history of the New Model Army, reference Keith Roberts’ *Cromwell’s War Machine, 1645–1660*. Donald Rumsfeld’s article on modernization can be found at *The Wall Street Journal*, “New Model Army.”

<sup>221</sup> Bernard Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1966).

<sup>222</sup> Allistair Bell and Tom Perry, “Obama Warns Russia’s Putin of ‘quagmire’ in Syria,” *Reuters*, October 3, 2015, sec. Aerospace and Defense, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-airstrikes-idUSKCN0RW0W220151003>.

<sup>223</sup> Andrew Roth and Thomas Gibbons-Neff, “Russia’s Military Is Unlikely to Turn the Tide of the Syrian War,” *News*, *The Washington Post*, 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/russias-military-is-unlikely-to-turn-the-tide-in-syrias-war/2015/10/03/1b9fff04-686a-11e5-bdb6-6861f4521205\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/russias-military-is-unlikely-to-turn-the-tide-in-syrias-war/2015/10/03/1b9fff04-686a-11e5-bdb6-6861f4521205_story.html); Michael Crowley, “Putin Boggling down in Syria,” *News*, *POLITICO*, 2015, <https://www.politico.com/story/2015/12/vladimir-putin-russia-syria-216609>; Daniel Drezner, “Putin’s Syrian Folly,” *Washington Post*, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2015/12/11/putins-syrian-folly/>; Anna Borshchevskaya, “In Syria, Putin Risks Repeating the Soviet Union’s Afghanistan Mistake,” *The Washington Institute*, 2015, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/syria-putin-risks-repeating-soviet-unions-afghanistan-mistake>.

<sup>224</sup> Martin Chulov, “Amid the Ruins of Syria, Is Bashar al-Assad Now Finally Facing the End?,” *The Guardian*, May 23, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/24/syria-iran-isis-battle-arab-world>.

role in negotiating future security agreements in the region.<sup>225</sup> Furthermore, the Russian military demonstrated an impressive ability to project force beyond the Near Abroad and achieve clear results with minimal cost in Russian lives or treasure. In contrast to the campaigns in Chechnya and Georgia, in which the military showed clear signs of strain projecting force across its own border, the Syrian campaign showcased an impressive and scalable expeditionary capability. The Syrian campaign should be seen as a model for future Russian Counter Irregular Warfare (CIW) operations.

This success was not a revolutionary departure, but rather had critical antecedents in the post-1989 era. In several respects, it represented the culmination of a 25-year evolution in irregular warfare capabilities honed in conflicts on the Russian periphery. The moderate successes of the Second Chechen War combined with the tactical and operational failures of the 2008 Georgian War (and subsequent reforms) set conditions for a transformation of the Russian CIW force. This chapter links Russian CIW operations to a longer-term evolution in force structure, joint fires capability, and technological integration at the tactical and operational levels of war.

## **B. THOSE WHO CAN, ADVISE**

The composition of Russian forces in Syria differed substantially from previous Russian CIW operations, highlighting a prioritization of advisory capabilities, reliance on private military companies (PMCs), and the development of forces specifically designed for stability operations. Russian prioritization of advisory efforts was a noticeable departure from historical norms and was visible soon after their arrival to Syria in 2015. Russian forces arrived prepared to contribute an array of advisory and partnered options to augment Assad's flagging army. Whereas the Chechenization process took years to develop and implement in the North Caucasus, the Russian

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<sup>225</sup> British Broadcasting Company, "Why Has the Syrian War Lasted 10 Years?," *BBC News*, March 12, 2021, sec. Middle East, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35806229>.

expeditionary force in Syria was integrated as advisors almost immediately.<sup>226</sup> Using a combination of military police executing tactical advisory operations, *Spetsnaz* units conducting reconnaissance, forward air control in support of regime forces, and Russian staffs advising at the operational level, the Russian mission in Syria injected expertise and lethality to a battered local force.<sup>227</sup>

Although the level of advising carried out by *Spetsnaz* units remains undetermined, it is apparent that Russian SOF executed FID missions.<sup>228</sup> During and following the fall of Aleppo in 2016, *Spetsnaz* elements operated alongside Syrian forces (see Figure 8) and purportedly led them on raids in Recondo-style live fire culminating exercises.<sup>229</sup> It would be easy to devolve into semantic debate on how to doctrinally categorize these operations, but the fact remains: whereas Russian integration with local forces in the Second Chechen War was essentially cooption, the relationship with Syrian forces more closely resembled training and advisory. *Spetsnaz* in Syria circa 2016–2018 augmented indigenous forces in a way not typical to previous Russian CIW operations.

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<sup>226</sup> Jean-François Ratelle and Emil Aslan Souleimanov, “A Perfect Counterinsurgency? Making Sense of Moscow’s Policy of Chechenisation,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 68, no. 8 (September 13, 2016): 1287–1314, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2016.1230842>. It should be noted that Russian integration with Syrian forces benefited from a host nation partner with an existing standing army—regardless of its relative decay at this point in the conflict.

<sup>227</sup> Charles Bartles and Lester Grau, “The Russian Ground Based Contingent in Syria,” *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, Russia’s War in Syria, 2020, 20.

<sup>228</sup> Mordechai Haas et al., “Russia’s Military Action in Syria Driven by Military Reforms,” *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 33:2 (July 3, 2020): 292–99.

<sup>229</sup> Fedor Danilchenko. “Стали известны детали операции «российского спецназа» в Сирии” [Details of a “Russian Spetnaz” operation in Syria become known].” *Moskovskoi Kosmolets*, January 13, 2021. <https://www.mk.ru/politics/2021/01/13/stali-izvestny-detali-operacii-rossiyskogo-specnaza-v-sirii.html>. Recondo here refers to the Vietnam-era training school for select U.S. personnel in Vietnam—the culminating exercise of which was often an actual operation. For additional information on the Military Assistance Command-Vietnam (MACV) recondo school, reference [www.sogsite.com/recondo-school/](http://www.sogsite.com/recondo-school/)



Figure 8. Russian Special Operations Supporting Syrian Arab Forces, May 2019.<sup>230</sup>

Additionally, the Russian CIW force composition in Syria reflected lessons learned from their operations in the North Caucasus and Africa. Whereas the early days of the Second Chechen War exhibited the lack of population-centric focus of the First Chechen War, the Russian expeditionary force in Syria employed military police units composed of deliberately-recruited Muslim servicemen to secure humanitarian convoys, escort journalists onto the battlefield, and prevent sectarian violence by patrolling recently pacified regions in the country (see Figure 9).<sup>231</sup> The Russian military police concept was theoretically an adoption of American equivalents during the mid-2000s,

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<sup>230</sup> Al-Masdar News. “Russian Special Forces Take Part in Northwestern Hama Offensive.” *Al-Masdar News* (blog), May 10, 2019. <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/russian-special-forces-take-part-in-northwestern-hama-offensive-photos/>.

<sup>231</sup> Mark Galeotti, “Not-So-Soft Power: Russia’s Military Police in Syria,” *War on the Rocks*, October 2, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/10/not-so-soft-power-russias-military-police-in-syria/>; Sarah Fainberg, “Russian Spetsnaz, Contractors and Volunteers in the Syrian Conflict,” n.d., 30.; Emmanuel Dreyfus, “The Russian Military Police, from Syria to Karabakh,” *News*, <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/>, 2021, <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/the-russian-military-police-from-syria-to-karabakh/>.



but the Russian forces in Syria expanded this role. Russian Military Police functioned as the doctrinal component for stability operations<sup>232</sup>

Russian forces also shifted their force structure to emulate the Western concept of population-centric COIN. As early as the siege of Aleppo, Russian Reconciliation Centers were involved in implementing an overtly conciliatory approach to separatist Syrian forces. Units from the Russian expeditionary forces executed what Western practitioners would identify as Civil Affairs operations. Delivering humanitarian aid, establishing field hospitals for wounded civilians, and negotiating neighborhood-level ceasefires were an important part of the Russian CIW strategy in Syria.<sup>233</sup>



Figure 9. Russian Military Police Patrolling Manbij, January 2019.<sup>234</sup>

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<sup>232</sup> Dreyfus, “The Russian Military Police, from Syria to Karabakh.”

<sup>233</sup> Ripley, Tim, *Operation Aleppo: Russia’s War in Syria* (Lancaster: Telic-Herrick Publications, 2018).

<sup>234</sup> Source: The New Arab, “Russian Military Police Patrol Syria’s Flash-Point Manbij amid Turkey Tensions,” News, <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/> (The New Arab, January 8, 2019), <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/news/russian-military-police-patrol-syrias-manbij-amid-turkey-tensions>.

### **C. DOGS OF WAR ON THE RUSSIAN LEASH**

In addition to an indigenous approach and the incorporation of CIW-focused units, the Russian integration of PMCs in Syria yielded arguable success, entrenching this technique into the Russian CIW playbook for years to come. Somewhat counter-intuitively to Western observers, even the killing of several hundred Wagner Group<sup>235</sup> fighters by U.S. forces in Deir el Zour province bolstered the utility of PMCs to Russia.<sup>236</sup> After the dust had settled, Russia had lost two hundred plus fighters in direct confrontation with limited local escalation and little domestic blowback or media coverage. Although the use of PMCs in Syria highlighted exploitable risk (the ability to kill mercenaries without escalation) and caused friction between the Kremlin and Wagner Group, the use of PMCs has continued in other theaters.<sup>237</sup>

### **D. PRECISION FIRES ON THE (RELATIVE) CHEAP**

Russian use of fires against irregular forces also underwent a renaissance in Syria. Although the classic Russian comfort level with high levels of collateral damage still existed, Russian fire support in Syria integrated the spectrum of joint fires and increased their ability to target effectively.<sup>238</sup> In addition to the use of naval gunfire support, the Russian expeditionary force combined close combat attack (CCA) aviation, traditional close air support (CAS) platforms like the Su-25 Frogfoot, and the Russian

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<sup>235</sup> Officially, Wagner Group is a Private Military Company (PMC, transliterated Russian abbreviation ChVK) that offers a variety of military services on an open market. In reality, this organization is both a PMC and a proxy arm of the Russian government. For an overview of the organization and its relations to the Russian state, reference Andrew Racz's "Band of Brothers: The Wagner Group and the Russian State" published by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).

<sup>236</sup> Schmitt, Eric, Ivan Nechepurenko, and C.J. Chivers. "The Truth about the Brutal Four-Hour Battle between Russian Mercenaries and U.S. Commandos in Syria." *The Independent*, 2018. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/battle-syria-us-russian-mercenaries-commandos-islamic-state-a8370781.html>.

<sup>237</sup> Ilya Barabanov and Nader Ibrahim, "Wagner: Scale of Russian Mercenary Mission in Libya Exposed - BBC News," *News*, British Broadcasting Company, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-58009514>.

<sup>238</sup> Human Rights Watch. "Syria/Russia: Strategy Targeted Civilian Infrastructure." *Human Rights Watch*, October 15, 2020. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/10/15/syria/russia-strategy-targeted-civilian-infrastructure>.

staple of massed artillery assets.<sup>239</sup> With the exception of cruise missiles, the use of any of these assets individually was unremarkable. What is noteworthy was their use in a Joint Fires construct. In a way that is very recognizable to Western military thought, the Russians matched their fires capabilities to apply appropriate assets to appropriate targets. Naval gunfire and long-range bombers provided a deep strike capability to their expeditionary force, while CCA and CAS platforms integrated in support of the close fight (see Figure 10).<sup>240</sup> Tube and rocket artillery proved a versatile mechanism to bring massed fires against opponents. Russian use of joint fires in Syria was not doctrinally unique but was important in its first use in an expeditionary CIW environment.<sup>241</sup>

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<sup>239</sup> Nataliya Vasilyeva and Phillip Issa, “Russian Navy Fires Cruise Missiles Into Eastern Syria,” AP News, April 21, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/moscow-syria-ap-top-news-international-news-united-states-a7453d904f9a401083eb35ea5a20585a>.; David Cenciotti, “Dramatic Videos Show Russian Mi-24 Hind Gunships Fighting Rebels in Syria,” Business Insider, accessed August 27, 2021, <https://www.businessinsider.com/dramatic-videos-show-mi-24-hind-gunships-fighting-rebels-in-syria-2015-10>.; Luis Martinez, “Russian Troops Fire Artillery and Rockets in Syria,” News, ABC News, 2015, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/russian-troops-fire-artillery-rockets-syria/story?id=34322668>.

<sup>240</sup> A component of the Russian approach towards use of CAS was the deliberate targeting of civilian infrastructure, specifically hospitals, as seen in the siege of Aleppo from June-December 2016. This tactical action was assessed by General Phillip Breedlove, then-NATO Supreme Allied Commander, as a deliberate attempt to weaponize migrant flow into western Europe. Information regarding the deliberate targeting of hospitals can be found in the Atlantic Council’s report, “Breaking Aleppo.” General Breedlove’s assessment is discussed in Lizzie Dearden’s March 03, 2016 article in the Independent, “Russia and Syria ‘weaponizing’ Refugee Crisis to Destabilize Europe, NATO Commander Claims.”

<sup>241</sup> Scott Boston and Dara Massicot, *The Russian Way of Warfare: A Primer* (RAND Corporation, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.7249/PE231>.

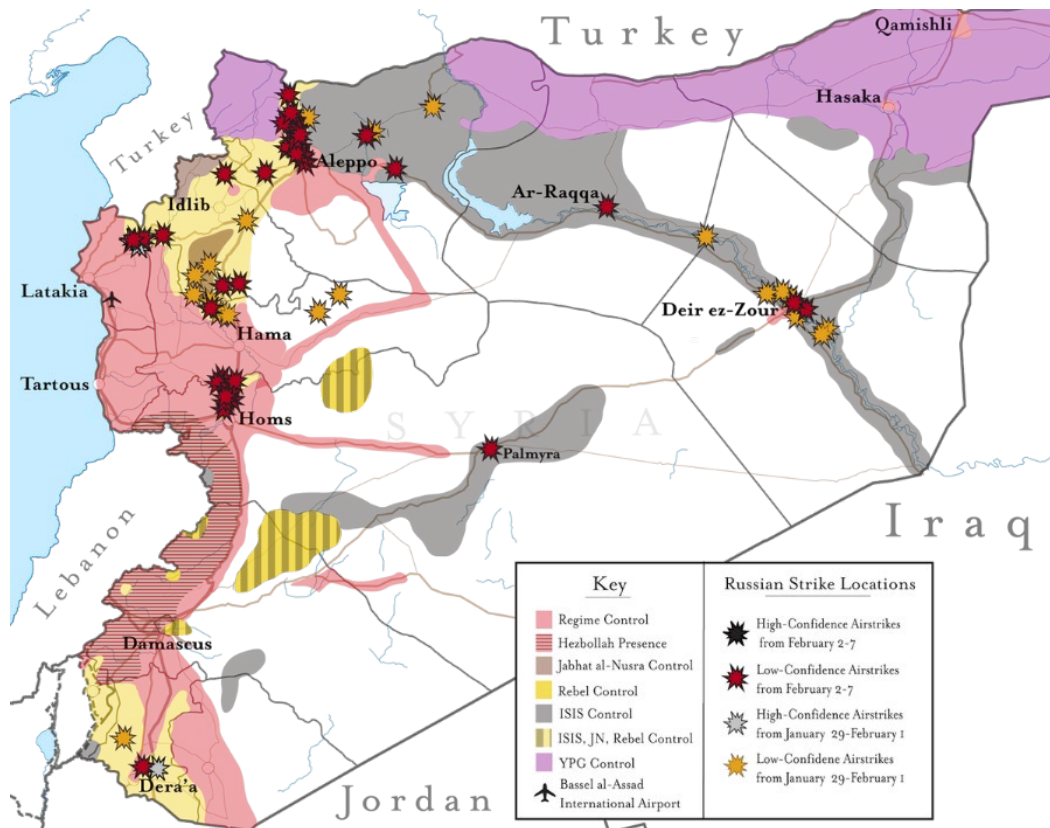


Figure 10. Map of Russian Airstrikes in Syria, 2016<sup>242</sup>

The improvement of Russian precision fires—at least theoretically—decreased the level of collateral damage as compared to previous combat operations in the North Caucasus and Ossetia. These changes in results were not due to Russia shying away from the potential of collateral damage, but rather an incorporation of new technology which improved their ability to accurately target.<sup>243</sup> No one who had perused the horrific aftermath of the battle for Aleppo or the later campaigns in Idlib could assume that the

<sup>242</sup> Source: Zack Beauchamp, “How Russian Bombing Is Changing Syria’s War in Three Maps,” Vox, February 16, 2016, <https://www.vox.com/2016/2/16/11020140/russia-syria-bombing-maps>.

<sup>243</sup> Ralph Shield, “Russian Airpower’s Success in Syria: Assessing Evolution in Kinetic Counterinsurgency,” *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 31, no. 2 (April 3, 2018): 214–39, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13518046.2018.1451099>.

Russian military had developed a sensitivity to human suffering.<sup>244</sup> What it had done was increase its ability to accurately employ aerial munitions.

The majority of advances in Russian aerial fires were attributed to the Russian Air Forces' (VVS) use of the SVP-24 bombsight.<sup>245</sup> Rather than pursuing the American technique of Joint Direct Attack Munition (JDAM) kits, the Russians instead upgraded their “dumb bomb” sight to improve accuracy. This modification was likely a matter of cost effectiveness. A JDAM kit is mounted on individual munitions, much like how American surface artillery “bolts on” Precision Guidance Kits (PGK) for 155mm howitzer rounds to increase accuracy.<sup>246</sup> The SVP-24 traded the significant increase in accuracy of munition-mounted modifications for a single-item purchase and more limited improvements--a low-tech solution for a low-tech problem. The VVS also benefitted from advances in avionics which expanded their ability to fly sorties at night, a marked departure from previous campaigns. In short, the Syrian operation demonstrated the Russian threat had evolved to now include joint fire support in a CIW environment, increased accuracy of airstrikes, and the capacity to run a high volume of sorties at night.<sup>247</sup>

## **E. A GAME OF TECHNOLOGICAL CATCHUP**

Syria also served as a live fire proving ground for new Russian technology: specifically drones and integrated mission command systems. Russian unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) flew tens of thousands of sorties against anti-government forces and provided increased intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) to ground

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<sup>244</sup> Mark Czuperski et al., “Breaking Aleppo,” Atlantic Council, accessed May 12, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/breaking-aleppo/>; British Broadcasting Company, “Syria War: Satellite Images Reveal Idlib Destruction and Displacement,” News, Syrian Civil War, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-51734748>.

<sup>245</sup> Hadi Nohouji, “Cost Effective Aerial Campaign: Russian Airstrikes In Syria and the SVP-24,” SouthFront, 2017, <https://southfront.org/cost-effective-aerial-campaign-russian-airstrikes-syria-svp-24/>.

<sup>246</sup> U.S. Army Acquisition Support Center, “Precision Guidance Kit (PGK),” accessed May 12, 2021, <https://asc.army.mil/web/portfolio-item/precision-guidance-kit-pgk/>.

<sup>247</sup> Guy Plopsky, “Russian Airpower In Syria: An Emphasis On Precision Strike? – Analysis,” *Eurasia Review* (blog), October 15, 2015, <https://www.eurasiareview.com/15102015-russian-airpower-in-syria-an-emphasis-on-precision-strike-analysis/>.

elements.<sup>248</sup> For example, during the drive to Aleppo in 2015, Russian drones enabled Syrian Tiger Force<sup>249</sup> columns to quickly clear large portions of the city while protecting their flanks from ambushes.<sup>250</sup> This application of technology to support indigenous formations will likely continue. Another successful use of the Russian UAV fleet in Syria was aerial observation for airstrikes and artillery. Russian drones were used to shorten the kill-chain by finding and fixing enemy forces, and as recently as 2020 were laser designating targets for precision strike.<sup>251</sup>

Much like PMCs, drones provoked limited to no response from the Russian public when lost and have been described as indispensable to military conflict by the Russian MoD. As of 2021 Russian expeditionary forces in Syria tested a strike capable drone, and fielding this capability remains a priority for the Russian MoD. In March of 2021, Sergei Shoigu made highly publicized visits to Russian domestic drone factories to underscore the ministries support for ongoing UAV modernization efforts.<sup>252</sup> The rise of drones in the popular consciousness of the Russia MoD combined with their emphasis on domestic design and production ensures that Russian use of UAVs will only continue to grow.

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<sup>248</sup> Vladimir Karnozov, “Russia Advances UAV Forces, Sheds Light on Syrian Experiences,” Aviation International News, accessed May 12, 2021, <https://www.ainonline.com/aviation-news/defense/2019-10-06/russia-advances-uav-forces-sheds-light-syrian-experiences>.

<sup>249</sup> The Tiger Force refers to the Russian-backed element of the Syrian military. Somewhat counter-intuitively, this ground force was founded, financed, trained, and commanded by the Syrian Air Intelligence Directorate. Although sometimes referred to as “elite,” the Tiger Force is conventionally structured (roughly two infantry brigades with armor and artillery support). Their combat effectiveness is a result of close integration with and advisory support from Russian forces. The above information and a more detailed description of the Tiger Force can be found in Gregory Waters 2018 paper for the Middle East Institute, “The Tiger Forces: Pro-Assad Fighters Backed by Russia.”

<sup>250</sup> Ripley, Tim, *Operation Aleppo: Russia’s War in Syria*.

<sup>251</sup> Vladimir Karnozov, “Innovative UAV Technology Helps Syrian Army Offensive in Idlib,” Aviation International News, accessed May 12, 2021, <https://www.ainonline.com/aviation-news/defense/2020-02-27/innovative-uav-technology-helps-syrian-army-offensive-idlib>.; Anton Lavrov, “Russian UAVs in Syria,” Center for Analysis of Strategy and Technology, accessed May 12, 2021, <http://cast.ru/products/articles/russian-uavs-in-syria.html>.

<sup>252</sup> Sergeit Ptitchkin. “Армия Получит Новые Комплексы с Ударными Беспилотниками в 2021 Году” [The army will receive new systems with strike drones in 2021]. Russkoye Oruzhie [Russian Weapons]. February 3, 2021. <https://rg.ru/2021/03/02/armiia-poluchit-novye-kompleksy-s-udarnymi-bespiilotnikami-v-2021-godu.html>; David Hambling, “Russia To Field Long-Range Attack Drones In 2021,” Forbes, accessed May 12, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidhambling/2020/08/12/russia-to-field-attack-drones-in-2021/>.; Lavrov, “Russian UAVs in Syria.”

Another new piece of technology debuted en masse in Syria was the Russian *Strelets* (“archer,” or “musketeer”) mission command system. A command-and-control system similar to the Android Tactical Assault Kit (ATAK) in the U.S. military, *Strelets* represented a milestone improvement in Russian ability to track friendly forces, submit digital calls for fire, and manage the battlefield at a tactical level.<sup>253</sup> Designed as a network of communications, data transfer, and blue force tracking, the *Strelets* system has been heralded by Russian sources as having reduced their ability to clear ground and commit fires in less than eight minutes.<sup>254</sup> Much like their advances in drones, the *Strelets* itself is not an overly impressive piece of equipment when compared to its Western equivalents, but is significant in its use by the Russian military in a CIW environment.

## F. CONCLUSION

Russian operations in Syria have merged a robust advise and assist capability, increasingly well integrated fire support, and multiple significant technological advances to establish the Syria model as a template for future Russian military successes. Whereas the Second Chechen War demonstrated the potential for advisory operations as a force multiplier, the Georgian campaign had highlighted the dangers of poorly integrated fire support and lagging technology. Of these three developments in Syria, the depth of the advise and assist capability stands out as arguably the most pivotal shift. By mixing and matching staff advisor teams, *spetznaz* elements, PMCs, and enablers, Moscow can now viably deploy a custom-tailored security package in support of allies or Russian interests abroad.

Russian successes in Syria can at least partially be attributed to late adopter advantage. From 2001 to 2015, the United States executed COIN across three continents. Tailoring the force, incorporation of drones, digitization of command and control, and a renewed emphasis on population centric approaches were hallmarks of this period in U.S. COIN. For its part, Russia did not adopt the Western model writ large, but instead modified

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<sup>253</sup> Dynamic Software Solutions, “Android Tactical Assault Kit,” ATAK, accessed May 12, 2021, <http://www.ds2.com/solutions/atak>.

<sup>254</sup> Strategy Page, “Information Warfare: Doing 2003 In Russian,” 2019, <https://www.strategypage.com/htm/htiw/articles/20190712.aspx>.

and bolted-on applicable aspects. Digital command-and-control, integration of drones, and robust enabler packages--none of which were part of the previous Russian model--were adopted and employed effectively on the Syrian proving ground. Russian CIW in Syria is a distinct blend of traditional approaches with Western-styled modifications.

This approach will prove particularly attractive in environments with an established partner force and in conflicts in which the Russian government seeks to exert force while minimizing both escalation with the West and the risk of domestic blowback. Furthermore, by developing force packages which Moscow can tailor and scale to a given problem set, the Russian military has established itself as a capable competitor to Western security assistance. As the next chapter will explore, fragile governments facing threats to their regime may increasingly look to a Russian solution rather than appeal to Western governments.

The final outcome of the Russian intervention in Syria remains uncertain. As of 2021, the Assad regime has secured the majority of the country and its largest cities, but significant portions of the country remain under a combination of Kurdish, Turkish, or jihadist factions.<sup>255</sup> A Russian and Turkish-backed cease fire has stabilized much of the violence since 2018, but renewed violence threatens to unravel these efforts and it remains unclear if the truce will hold.<sup>256</sup> While the Russian investment appears to have paid off, only time will tell if Moscow can truly avoid the quagmire predicted by then President Obama.

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<sup>255</sup> British Broadcasting Company, “Why Has the Syrian War Lasted 10 Years?”

<sup>256</sup> Jared Malsin and Suha Ma’ayeh, “Russia’s Quest for Mideast Influence Hindered by Renewed Fighting in Syria,” *Wall Street Journal*, August 9, 2021, sec. World, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/russias-quest-for-mideast-influence-hindered-by-renewed-fighting-in-syria-11628506802>.



## VIII. MODULAR CIW: BEYOND THE NEAR ABROAD

### A. INTRODUCTION

The preceding chapter's discussion of the ongoing Russian intervention in Syria displays the full suite of Russian CIW capabilities. Yet it is in Africa where Russia has demonstrated the modularity of its CIW suite. The Soviet Union possessed a limited CIW capability, consisting mostly of large-scale military response writ small or convoluted workarounds through client states.<sup>257</sup> This remained true for much of the 1990s and early 2000s. Nonetheless, by applying the lessons learned in the post-Soviet Era and combining them with meaningful reforms and restructuring, the Russian Federation now has a more flexible and scalable selection of capabilities.

To illustrate this point, this chapter will briefly discuss the recent Russian CIW experiences in Mozambique, the Central African Republic (CAR), and Libya. Moscow has invested specific assets to each of these nations in support of both the host country and Russia's policy goals. These tailorable CIW approaches do not make conventional Russian military capabilities irrelevant, but they do provide additional options to attain the Kremlin's strategic goals.

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<sup>257</sup> John Matthews, *Explosion: The Hungarian Revolution of 1956* (New York, NY.: Hippocrene Books, 2007); Ron Soodalter, "Over Where? Cuban Fighters in Angola's Civil War," HistoryNet, October 20, 2016, <https://www.historynet.com/cuban-fighters-angolas-civil-war.htm>.

## B. MOZAMBIQUE AND CAR: THE PMC PURE APPROACH

In sub-Saharan Africa, Russian CIW efforts have taken a noticeably lighter approach than in Syria.<sup>258</sup> The governments of both the CAR and Mozambique faced internal security threats and sought Russian CIW support. In both cases, Russia intervened with a minimal force, relying heavily on Private Military Companies (PMCs). The mixed results of these interventions highlight both the potential opportunities and risks of executing these smaller scale operations.

Within CAR, somewhere between 600 and 2000 Russian PMCs have embedded themselves into the country's security apparatus (see Figure 11).<sup>259</sup> Russian mercenaries provide personal security detachments for the country's president, train security forces throughout the country, and accompany CAR soldiers on operations.<sup>260</sup> In contrast to Russian operations in Syria, any integration of artillery, air support, or the technology available to Russian forces in the Syrian campaign are impractical in sub-Saharan Africa. The limited information available on the Russian CIW operation in CAR indicates that the

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<sup>258</sup> The recent Russian CIW experience in Africa is ironic in that it is an inversion of their role on the continent during the Cold War. Soviet inroads into Africa during the Cold War often manifested in long-term support to Communist insurgent movements such as the Front for the Liberation of Mozambique (FRELIMO) in the 1970s and 1980s, and the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA) in Zambia and Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia) during the 1960s. During the 1960 Congo Crisis, after the United States sided with secessionist leader Moise Tshombe (and later military officer Mobutu Sese Seko), deposed Prime Minister of the Congo Patrice Lumumba sought Soviet support. This support to insurgent movements in Africa was a manifestation of the previously discussed "Messianism" that drove much of Soviet foreign policy during the Cold War. The significance nationalist African movements to the Soviet Union was memorialized in the collective Russian psyche by the 1961 naming of the Patrice Lumumba Peoples' Friendship University in honor of the slain leader. For a history of Committee for State Security (KGB) involvement in Africa during the Cold War, reference *The World Was Going Our Way: The KGB and the Battle for the Third World* by Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin. For a first-hand narrative of combat along the Rhodesian/Zambian border against Soviet-backed forces, reference Tony Ballinger's 2015 memoir, *A Walk Against the Stream: A Rhodesian National Service Officer's Story of the Bush War*.

<sup>259</sup> Declan Walsh, "Russian Mercenaries Are Driving War Crimes in Africa, U.N. Says," New York Times, accessed October 3, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/27/world/asia/russia-mercenaries-central-african-republic.html>.

<sup>260</sup> Deutsche Welle, "Russian Mercenaries Accused of Rights Violations in Central African Republic," DW News, accessed October 3, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/russian-mercenaries-accused-of-rights-violations-in-central-african-republic/a-57201150>; Dionne Searcey, "Gems, Warlords and Mercenaries: Russia's Playbook in Central African Republic," New York Times, accessed October 3, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/30/world/russia-diamonds-africa-prigozhin.html>; VICE News, *The Central African Republic Is Enlisting Russians in Its War Against Rebels*, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oK63yqJYkGg>.

support has consisted entirely of PMCs strengthening local formations and advising on operations.

Russian intervention in the CAR can be viewed as a mixed success. Although the CIW force succeeded in seizing key natural resources and inflicting casualties on various rebel groups, the Russian approach has been internationally condemned, accusations of human rights violations abound, and there are serious questions about the sustainability of Moscow's gains in the region. Whereas the Kremlin has stated that Russia is withdrawing these forces, similar posturing in Syria circa 2016 casts doubt on the veracity of this claim.<sup>261</sup> While the future of Russian CIW support to CAR remains uncertain, the operation's tentative success indicates Russia retains the option to execute advise/assist/accompany operations with purely PMC support—a light package.

For all its advantages, this PMC centric approach comes with limitations and Russia appears to be experimenting with how to best tailor these interventions. Much as in CAR, Russian CIW in Mozambique was restricted to PMC operations. Drawn in by natural gas, mining opportunities, and precious metals, the Kremlin committed approximately 200 Russian mercenaries in 2019.<sup>262</sup> Although expecting Syria-like results, these limited forces struggled to make a meaningful dent in the insurgency taking holding of the country. Much like the forces deployed to the CAR, they lacked any support from the uniformed services, bringing only three attack helicopters to augment their operations. Within two months of arrival, seven Wagner Group mercenaries were executed by ISIS following an ambush in the rural north of the country resulting in a prompt withdrawal of forces by Moscow. Although this ambush was small in casualties, it demonstrated a loss of confidence on the part of the Mozambique government. Russian forces went from being viewed as a

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<sup>261</sup> Agence France Presse, "Russia Pulling 'Military Instructors' Out of Central African Republic," *The Moscow Times*, January 15, 2021, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/01/15/russia-pulling-military-instructors-out-of-central-african-republic-a72631>; Denis Dyomkin and Sulemain Al-Khalidi, "Putin Says Russians to Start Withdrawing From Syria, as Peace Talks Resume," *Reuters*, March 14, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-pullout/putin-says-russians-to-start-withdrawing-from-syria-as-peace-talks-resume-idUSKCN0WG23C>.

<sup>262</sup> Tim Lister and Sebastian Shukla, "Russian Mercenaries Fight Shadowy Battle in Gas-Rich Mozambique," *Cable News Network*, November, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/11/29/africa/russian-mercenaries-mozambique-intl/index.html>.

professional CIW option to being referred to as “out of their depth.”<sup>263</sup> The case of Mozambique highlights these smaller PMC-centric approaches bring the advantages of lower risk and increased deniability but bring with them a greater chance of mission failure.



Figure 11. Russian PMCs Providing Presidential Security in CAR, 2021<sup>264</sup>

### C. LIBYA: SYRIA-LIGHT

On the spectrum of Russian CIW interventions, Libya represents an evolving middle ground between the full backing of the Russian military seen in Syria and the lighter, more deniable, interventions in CAR and Mozambique. While still relying heavily on PMCs, the Libyan intervention has benefited from a steadily increasing willingness to employ conventional Russian military forces, firepower, and technical equipment. Ethnic Russian mercenaries under the umbrella conglomerate of Wagner Group form the core of

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<sup>263</sup> Ben Simonson, “Mozambique and the Fight Against Insurgency,” *Global Risk Insights*, February 8, 2021, <https://globalriskinsights.com/2021/02/too-many-mercenaries-in-mozambique/>.

<sup>264</sup> Source: Deutsche Welle, “Russian Mercenaries Accused of Rights Violations in Central African Republic.”

this CIW force.<sup>265</sup> In support of this contingent (since 2019) are Arab mercenaries recruited from within the Russian-controlled regions of Syria.<sup>266</sup> These Russian and Syrian PMCs are in turn augmenting indigenous partners of Khalifa Haftar’s Libyan National Army (LNA). Although Western media reported the presence of both *Spetsnaz* and GRU operatives in Libya between 2017–2018, their exact role and composition remains difficult to discern.<sup>267</sup> Recent precedent from Ukraine and Syria would indicate that any GRU elements on the ground are providing connective tissue to indigenous forces, while *Spetsnaz* elements would most likely augment these efforts with reconnaissance capabilities and advisory relationships.

Although conventional ground forces have been noticeably absent in the Libyan conflict up to 2020, recent reporting indicates this may be shifting. Sporadic open-source reports from NGOs claimed that by the summer of 2021 Russian regular forces were on the ground in Libya.<sup>268</sup> If true, the claim of conventional forces conducting operations out of Jufra Airbase (a Haftar stronghold) would indicate a pivot in Russian efforts in Libya. The open commitment of Russian conventional forces in Syria was an indication of Russian acceptance of a persistent footprint in the region and would indicate similar resolve for the Libyan operation. Even if true, this commitment of forces is a far cry from the robust layering of Military Police, Civil Affairs, Airborne Forces and *Spetsnaz* seen in the fight to support the Assad regime. While there is some similarity in the Russian advisory/SOF

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<sup>265</sup> U.S. Africa Command, “Russia, Wagner Group Continue Military Involvement in Libya,” U.S. Department of Defense, 2020, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2287821/russia-wagner-group-continue-military-involvement-in-libya/>.

<sup>266</sup> Reuters Staff, “Russian Hiring of Syrians to Fight in Libya Accelerated in May,” Reuters, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security-syria-russia-exclusive/exclusive-russian-hiring-of-syrians-to-fight-in-libya-accelerated-in-may-idUSKBN23E06H>.

<sup>267</sup> Daily Ringtone, “Uptick in Russian Special Forces in Libya Is a Reminder of the Kremlin’s Africa Ambitions,” *Daily Ringtone* (blog), October 12, 2018, <https://medium.com/@thebell.io/uptick-in-russian-special-forces-in-libya-is-a-reminder-of-the-kremlins-africa-ambitions-1f33c098cafa>.

<sup>268</sup> Daily Sabah, “Regular Russian Troops Stationed in Libya,” Daily Sabah, July 23, 2021, <https://www.dailysabah.com/world/africa/regular-russian-troops-stationed-in-libya>; Libyan Express, “Regular Organized Russian Forces Begin Their Deployment to Libya,” *Libyan Express* (blog), July 24, 2021, <https://www.libyanexpress.com/dhrf-regular-organized-russian-forces-begin-their-deployment-to-libya/>.

packages deployed to Libya, the key divergence from Syria is Russia's greater reliance on PMCs augmenting Libyan formations.

Fires integration has also taken a distinct form in Libya. As opposed to the joint integration of naval, fixed wing, rotary wing, and surface fires in Syria, the Russian CIW package in Libya has as of 2020 relied more heavily on privately contracted fixed wing support.<sup>269</sup> In the summer of 2020 Russia committed a fleet of government-owned Mig-29 and Su-24 aircraft flown by contracted pilots in an attempt to tip the scales in Haftar's favor.<sup>270</sup> Additionally, although not used as a Close Combat Attack (CCA) platform in Libya, Russian rotary wing has been anecdotally referenced as executing Combat Search and Rescue (CSAR) operations in support of contracted CAS.<sup>271</sup> This would indicate a Russian rotary wing presence that is kept removed from the public eye to preserve deniability and reduce risk. Russian naval and surface-to-surface fires remain noticeably absent from the theater.

Libya has also highlighted the shifting role of technology in Russian CIW. Described as a "laboratory for air war," Russian forces have engaged in a consistent duel between incorporating Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS) and countering enemy UAS

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<sup>269</sup> Fedor Danychev. "Российские ЧВК в Ливии Показали «свою» Авиацию" Russian PMC in Libya showed 'its own' aviation]. *Moskovskoi Kosmolets*, August 2021. <https://www.mk.ru/politics/2021/08/04/rossiyskie-chvk-v-livii-pokazali-svoyu-aviaciyu.html>.

<sup>270</sup> Diana Stancy Correll, "AFRICOM: Russian Fighter Jets Flown by Mercenaries Are Conducting Combat Activities in Libya," *Military Times*, September 12, 2020, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2020/09/11/africom-russian-fighter-jets-flown-by-mercenaries-are-conducting-combat-activities-in-libya/>.

<sup>271</sup> Thomas Newdick and Joseph Trevithick. "Two Russian MiG-29s Have Crashed In Libya According To Top American Intel Official." *The Drive*, September 11, 2020. <https://www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/36365/two-russian-mig-29s-have-crashed-in-libya-according-to-top-american-intel-official>.

threats.<sup>272</sup> In a sign of increasing commitment, Russia has provided high-end air defense artillery (ADA) to protect their CIW investments from UAS attack. Although potentially supplied through cutouts to limit attribution, Turkish-backed Libyan forces captured a *Pantsir* S1 ADA launcher guarding Al-Watiya airbase—Haftar’s (and Russia’s) staging area in the northwest of the country.<sup>273</sup> The evolving UAS threat has led to an increase in Russian innovation initiatives, focused on improving ADA and Counter-UAS (CUAS) assets.<sup>274</sup>

Russian CIW has evolved in Libya has evolved over the last five years, going from a small, struggling paramilitary package in 2016 to something just shy of the Syria operation.<sup>275</sup> Force composition in Libya is far more reliant on privatized forces, and uses amalgamations of third-party mercenaries (Syrian Arab). Fires are more limited in nature, and rely heavily on the incorporation of privately contracted air support. Although lagging, the need to increase ADA and CUAS assets for force protection are indicative of a Russian stance on innovation that would have been alien prior to the 2008 military reforms. The flexibility of the options available to the Kremlin in Africa, when combined with the robust CIW package demonstrated in Syria, provides the Kremlin with a broad range of tools to accomplish its security goals beyond the Near Abroad. With this spectrum of available

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<sup>272</sup> Tom Kington, “Libya Is Turning into a Battle Lab for Air Warfare,” *Defense News*, August 6, 2020, <https://www.defensenews.com/smr/nato-air-power/2020/08/06/libya-is-turning-into-a-battle-lab-for-air-warfare/>. The use of Libya as both a proving ground for tactics and equipment and a venue for proxy competition joins a long line of similar conflicts. Among them are the Spanish Civil War which saw Soviet and Nazi aligned “volunteers” combat testing equipment such as the Heinkel HE-111 and Dornier Do 17 bombers (Germany) and the Soviet T-26 light tank. In the interwar period, the Royal Air Force (RAF) executed similar experimental bombing campaigns during the 1920 Iraqi rebellion in the British colonial holding of Mesopotamia. For a description of Soviet and German testing and advising during the Spanish Civil War, reference Stephen Zaloga’s 1999 article “Soviet Tank Operations in the Spanish Civil War.” For a description of British bombing operations during the 1920s, reference David Omissi’s 1990 book *Air Power and Colonial Control: The Royal Air Force 1919–1939* (pp. 19–39).

<sup>273</sup> Paul Iddon, “That Pantsir-S1 The U.S. Acquired From Libya Isn’t The First Russian Missile System Its Gotten Its Hands On,” *Forbes*, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/pauliddon/2021/01/31/that-pantsir-s1-it-acquired-from-libya-isnt-the-first-russian-missile-system-the-us-has-gotten-its-hands-on/?sh=153675c5371a>.

<sup>274</sup> Urcosta, Ridvan Bari. “The Revolution in Drone Warfare: The Lessons from the Idlib De-Escalation Zone.” *Air University (AU)*, August 31, 2020. <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JEMEEA/Display/Article/2329510/the-revolution-in-drone-warfare-the-lessons-from-the-idlib-de-escalation-zone/>.

<sup>275</sup> Sergey Sukhankin. “Russian Mercenaries Pour Into Africa and Suffer More Losses (Part One).” *Eurasian Daily Monitor* 17, no. 6. (January 21, 2020). <https://jamestown.org/program/russian-mercenaries-pour-into-africa-and-suffer-more-losses-part-one/>.

option, Moscow currently has the capability to develop CIW packages tailored to the level of risk, attribution, and investment desired.

#### **D. CONCLUSION**

Historically, Russian CIW has been constrained to the Near Abroad. That is no longer the case. Expeditionary modularity combined with the need to secure natural resources have allowed Russian CIW operations to expand from its traditional sphere of influence—a trend that will likely continue. The Russian CIW operations in Africa are distinguishable by flexibility and scalability; approaches which allow Moscow to tailor both investment and attributability. This flexibility is nearly unrecognizable when compared to the options available to Russia in the early 1990s. Earlier Russian CIW options were a choice between different sized hammers, whereas now the toolkit has expanded.

With a range of modular options also comes a range of limitations and exploitability. While PMC's are useful for deniability, they can also be targeted with less risk of escalation.<sup>276</sup> Russian SOF, conventional forces, and intelligence operatives carry with them the weight of the state. PMC's—even if they are dispatched on the orders of the Kremlin—do not. Likewise, unless they are backed by conventional Russian military support, these PMC centric packages have met with mixed results, leading to declarations that they are “out of their depth,” and “not up to the job.”<sup>277</sup> Recent attempts to increase combat power in Libya are likely a result of the realization that, as explained by one participant, “...this is not Syria. There are no [Russian] Ministry of Defense forces and our guys [Wagner Group--Russian mercenaries] have not been able to find common language with Haftar.”<sup>278</sup>

For U.S. practitioners, the most significant takeaway from Russian modularity is that U.S. SOF may find themselves overlapping with Russian forces in a way not seen in

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<sup>276</sup> Schmitt, Nechepurenko, and Chivers, “The Truth about the Brutal Four-Hour Battle between Russian Mercenaries and U.S. Commandos in Syria.”

<sup>277</sup> Pjotr Sauer, “In Push for Africa, Russia's Wagner Mercenaries Are ‘Out of Their Depth’ in Mozambique,” *The Moscow Times*, 2019, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/11/19/in-push-for-africa-russias-wagner-mercenaries-are-out-of-their-depth-in-mozambique-a68220>.

<sup>278</sup> Sukhankin, Sergey. “Russian Mercenaries Pour Into Africa and Suffer More Losses (Part One).”



the last 20 years. Lines are now more blurred, and nations now have at least two distinct COIN/CIW partners to choose from and arguably far more when one includes the distinct brands of Europe and the increasing presence of China in international security exchanges. Mozambique exemplifies this new reality, as the government requested and received U.S. SOF support to counter ISIS in the months following the Russian withdrawal.<sup>279</sup> As seen in Syria, the consistent interaction, increased risk for both parties, and the need for structured deconfliction will likely become a hallmark of Russian CIW outside the Near Abroad. The evolution of Russian CIW has increased the number of tools available, and in turn pushed CIW operations outside of their traditional geographic constraints.

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<sup>279</sup> Declan Walsh and Eric Schmitt, “American Soldiers Help Mozambique Battle an Expanding ISIS Affiliate,” *The New York Times*, March 15, 2021, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/15/world/africa/mozambique-american-troops-isis-insurgency.html>.

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## IX. FINDINGS

What happened in the past can be very complicated, as is life. One way to learn from the past is to simplify the record of what happened: distill and distill until, at last, the final essence offers a usable generalization, a parable.

Dr. Phillip Zelikow *The Power of the Past*, 2015

While it is indeed important to learn the appropriate lessons from history to best predict the future, one must carefully select the cases for analysis to avoid flawed lessons and interpretations. If one wants to predict the essence of future successful resistance, then *contemporary* examples must be studied in detail.

Dr. Sandor Fabian, Modern Warfare Institute at West Point, 2021<sup>280</sup>

While the “Revolution in Military Affairs” remains a contentious topic, the effects of radical technological changes brought about by networked operations and PGMs c. 1991 merit consideration from adversarial and U.S. perspectives alike.<sup>281</sup> Building on lessons from the Gulf War, the U.S. and its Allies have developed increasingly sophisticated tools and approaches to the contemporary battlefield, and its slew of asymmetric threats.

For its part, the Russian military has observed these developments and emerged from its own evolution, learning many lessons in blood along the way. It remains likely that this rapid change will continue as Russia increasingly involves itself in irregular conflicts beyond its traditional sphere of influence. While many of the lessons learned by Russian leadership have resulted in changes comparable to those experienced by the U.S. and European militaries over the past two decades, today’s Russian military retains a distinct approach. This Russian “flavor” of defeating irregular threats warrants deliberate consideration as the United States engages with the resurgent power on the global stage

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<sup>280</sup> Sandor Fabian, “Not Your Grandfather’s Resistance: The Unavoidable Truths about Small States’ Best Defense Against Aggression,” Modern War Institute, September 29, 2021, <https://mwi.usma.edu/not-your-grandfathers-resistance-the-unavoidable-truths-about-small-states-best-defense-against-aggression/>.

<sup>281</sup> “Revolution in Military Affairs” refers to the hotly debated notion that the U.S. victory in the 1991 Gulf War and subsequent invasion of Iraq in 2003 demonstrate such a departure from previous approaches to warfare that rather than simply constituting the next evolution of military technology, they are harbingers of a fundamental shift in how nations will need to organize to wage war, requiring drastic change among both societies and militaries throughout the world to prevent obsolescence.

and bears relevance to any consideration of U.S. SOF executing UW against a Russian, or Russian-backed, force.

This research has traced changes within the Russian CIW approach, identifying three themes: composition of the CIW force, incorporation of joint fires, and integration of contemporary technology by maneuver elements. Across all three themes, the Russian military retains some elements of its historic tradition, such as conscription or its focus on destroying “terrorists” rather than addressing a population’s core grievances. However, the Russian military has also undergone remarkable changes since 2008, making comparisons to their approaches in campaigns prior to 2013 perilous sources for properly understanding how Russia will likely execute CIW in the future. Regardless of the transformation, an understanding of the metamorphosis and evolution of Russian CIW provides a more thorough and accurate understanding of the current state of the threat. The following paragraphs highlight the key operational changes for each of the themes.

#### **A. FORCE COMPOSITION**

The professionalization of the Russian military has arguably enabled much of this rapid evolution. By pivoting away from a force reliant upon mass conscription and short terms of service, the Russian military has opened the door to increased readiness, specialization, and technical proficiency within its ranks. As of 2020, three quarters of the Russian army was composed of volunteers, and a ban on service abroad for conscripts has forced recent CIW efforts to be executed exclusively by professional soldiers.<sup>282</sup> The elimination of conscripts from expeditionary CIW forces gives the Russian military the ability to build a base of experience within a professional corps as opposed to facing the turmoil of personnel turnover from 12–24 month service obligations. This in turn yields the ability to increase unit cohesion and proficiency in more advanced technologies at the tactical level, such as digital command-and-control systems or UAVs. In short, although not directly targeted at creating effective CIW formations, professionalization in the Russian military has contributed to a marked increase in CIW capability.

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<sup>282</sup> Gil Barndollar, “The Best or Worst of Both Worlds?,” Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 2020, <https://www.csis.org/blogs/post-soviet-post/best-or-worst-both-worlds>.

While Russian CIW interventions prior to 2013 consistently struggled to integrate disparate elements into cohesive packages, current Russian CIW operations demonstrate increased interoperability within the Russian defense enterprise. Moscow can now readily employ combinations of forces from across the joint, interagency, and private sectors to form bespoke task forces in support of national interests without suffering from the egregious failures in communication and coordination seen prior to 2013. PMCs provide plausibly deniable maneuver elements, combat trainers, close air support (in the case of Libya), and a whole suite of specialty logistic and support services depending on the operational environment.

In the 1990s, Russian defense leaders often resorted to assembling forces in an ad hoc manner, cannibalizing brigades to form battalions and battalions to form companies. Today, Russian expeditionary packages draw from professional volunteer brigades and battalions, augmented by force multipliers such as SOF, UAV forces, MPs, and PMCs. Although some of this modularity could be a product of regular operational employment, Russian Defense Minister's Sergei's Shoigu's 2021 description of Russian strategic force generation indicate it is a deliberate act. "Self-sufficient groupings of troops have been created in strategic [lines of effort]," said Shoigu, "SOF, military police, and unmanned aviation units."<sup>283</sup>

Additionally, the increased reliance on indigenization and third-party recruitment of the CIW force is a notable adaptation of force composition. Whether deliberately using Caucasian Muslim forces in Syria, Syrian mercenaries in Libya, or simply backing the local partner force, this is a change in the historical precedent for Russian CIW forces. Shoigu's commentary, placed against the backdrop of CIW operations in Syria, highlights that Russia is making deliberate moves to increase expeditionary CIW capability.

Finally, the Russian military has expanded the role of multiple elements to include distinctly CIW-specific missions. Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) SOF have expanded outside of their traditional roles of Direct Action (DA) and Special Reconnaissance

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<sup>283</sup> Interfax. "РФ создала самодостаточные группировки войск на стратегических направлениях" [Russian Federation created self-sufficient groupings of forces in strategic lines of effort]. Interfax.ru, 2021. <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/761514>.

(SR).<sup>284</sup> Today's Russian SOF frequently serve alongside partners, allowing Moscow to harness and improve the capabilities of indigenous forces. The use of Russian SOF in Syria and Libya highlights that this trend will continue for the foreseeable future. Following their debut in Syria, Russian Military Police units have continued to expand their role in the CIW realm. This remains a notable divergence from the U.S. approach. While the U.S. continues to use infantry, armor, and--as late as Operations Iraqi and Enduring Freedom--artillery units to execute stability operations, Russia now has a branch of its Army dedicated to, trained for, and tasked with stabilizing territory seized by maneuver units.<sup>285</sup>

## B. JOINT FIRES

The transformation of Russian fires in CIW operations has focused primarily on a pivot towards joint fires and the incorporation of precision weapons. Joint Fires are defined in U.S. doctrine as “Fires delivered during the employment of forces from two or more components in coordinated action to produce desired effects in support of a common objective.”<sup>286</sup> Often, the difficulty in executing joint fires is coordination and communications—as evidenced by the fratricide, lack of effective CAS, and delayed artillery support during the Russo-Georgian War. Russia's expeditionary fire support in Syria, however, displayed an ability to coordinate and apply fires assets in a joint environment. Naval gunfire, ground artillery, rotary wing attack aircraft, CAS, and

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<sup>284</sup> Direct Action is defined in Joint Publication (JP) 3-05 II-5 as “short duration strikes and other small scale offensive actions conducted as a special operation in hostile, denied, or diplomatically sensitive environments, and which employ specialized military capabilities to seize, destroy, capture, exploit, recover, or damage designated targets.” Special Reconnaissance is defined in JP 3-05 II-7 as “reconnaissance and surveillance actions conducted as special operations in hostile, denied, or diplomatically sensitive environments to verify information of strategic or operational significance, employing military capabilities not normally found in conventional forces.” (Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Special Operations*).

<sup>285</sup> Roger McDermott, “Russia's Armed Forces Enhance UAV Strike Capability,” *Eurasian Daily Monitor* 18, no. 148, accessed October 17, 2021, <https://jamestown.org/program/russias-armed-forces-enhance-uav-strike-capability/>. William Knarr et al., “Al-Sawaha--The Awakening Volume IV: Al Anbar Province, Area of Operations Topeka, Ramadi” (Institute for Defense Analysis Joint Advanced Warfighting Program, 2016), 289, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/AD1020271.pdf>.

<sup>286</sup> Ptichkin, “Армия Получит Новые Комплексы с Ударными Беспилотниками в 2021 Году [The Army Will Receive New Systems With Strike Drones in 2021]”; Mark Episkopos, “Russia Hopes to Build a Deadly Drone Swarm Weapon,” Text, *The National Interest* (The Center for the National Interest, January 21, 2021), <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/russia-hopes-build-deadly-drone-swarm-weapon-176781>; Inder Bisht, “Russian Commanders to Be Trained in Drone Warfare,” *The Defense Post* (blog), August 11, 2021, <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2021/08/11/russia-commanders-drone-warfare/>.

maneuver-organic assets were coordinated at a level previously not seen in a Russian CIW environment. Increased emphasis on communications and fires training has resulted in increased lethality for Russian CIW forces.

Additionally, Russian fires benefit from increased precision. Highlighted by operations in Syria and Libya, Russian forces, though still willing to absorb potential fallout from heavy civilian casualties—can engage targets with more precision due to developments in improved sights. Continued Russian investment in laser designation and terminally guided munitions, particularly with the assistance of UAVs, add to the increase in precision. Russian fires are by no means scalpels, but nor are they the single-use sledgehammer of previous CIW conflicts.

### C. TECHNOLOGICAL INTEGRATION AT THE TACTICAL LEVEL

Today’s Russian military, and therefore CIW operations, benefits from significantly more advanced technology distributed at the operational and tactical level. This increased integration of technology includes the incorporation of increasingly advanced UAV platforms and digital command and control. Although Russian forces have only scratched the surface of digital mission command with the integration of the *Strelets* system, it will likely continue to refine and develop. Additionally, Russian forces in Libya have used commercial, off-the-shelf options such as iPads to track front line traces and synchronize operations.<sup>287</sup>

UAVs, which rose to prominence within U.S. led COIN operations, now form a core component of the Russian approach. This capability is improving quickly due to significant investment and emphasis from the Kremlin.<sup>288</sup> Even with unarmed UAVs (e.g., the Siege of Aleppo circa 2016–2017), Russian forces successfully integrated these platforms to provide timely intelligence and enable maneuver. As of 2021, Russian forces training domestically had integrated unarmed and armed UAV platforms with a ground

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<sup>287</sup> Barabanov and Ibrahim, “Wagner: Scale of Russian Mercenary Mission in Libya Exposed - BBC News.”

<sup>288</sup> Ptichkin, “Армия Получит Новые Комплексы с Ударными Беспилотниками в 2021 Году [The Army Will Recieve New Systems With Stirke Drones in 2021]”; Episkopos, “Russia Hopes to Build a Deadly Drone Swarm Weapon.” Bisht, “Russian Commanders to Be Trained in Drone Warfare.”

maneuver force—synchronizing strikes using a *Strelets*-enabled command post. The Russian kill chain is getting shorter and more precise due to the synching of digital command-and-control and drones, an important improvement for future CIW campaigns.

Likewise, Russian experiences in Syria, Libya, Ukraine, and Nagorno Karabakh, have kept the Russian military at the forefront of C-UAS advances. As a result of these experiences, each Russian military district now has a dedicated element to countering enemy drone attacks and routinely drill against mass UAV attacks in unit training scenarios.<sup>289</sup> Russian C-UAS tactics rely predominately upon layered electronic warfare defenses to defeat the threat drone’s navigation and communication system but also include techniques for physically destroying adversarial UAVs with standard weapons systems.<sup>290</sup> While these methods do not provide a total defense against enemy UAVs, they have proven effective against even U.S. and United Nations unmanned systems in Syria and Ukraine, respectively.<sup>291</sup>

#### **D. SUMMARY**

Russian military metamorphosis in CIW has benefited from a late-adopter advantage. For well over a decade, the Russian MoD has observed the United States and her allies execute COIN operations across three continents with varying success. Although the Russian military has not opted to adopt Western COIN wholesale, it has taken the individual elements addressed above and grafted them into the traditional Russian CIW approach. That said, this evolution is not guaranteed to continue—Russian absorption of Western equipment, tactics, and techniques has been selective and there is no formula to predict what they will adopt in the future. To highlight this point, Russia has reduced collateral damage relative to their historical CIW operations, but not when compared to the

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<sup>289</sup> Samuel Bendett, “Russia’s Real-World Experience Is Driving Counter-Drone Innovations,” *Defense News*, May 24, 2021, <https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/commentary/2021/05/23/russias-real-world-experience-is-driving-counter-drone-innovations/>.

<sup>290</sup> Roman Krezul and Alexei Ramm, “Отстрел Дронов Включили в Боевую Подготовку [Shooting Drones Included in Combat Training],” *Izvestiya*, 2018, <https://iz.ru/762715/roman-kretcul-aleksei-ramm/otstrel-dronov-vkliuchili-v-boevuiu-podgotovku>.

<sup>291</sup> *Indian Defense News*, “Russia Is Jamming American Drones In Syria, Officials Say,” *Indian Defence News* (blog), 2018, <http://www.indiandefensenews.in/2018/04/russia-is-jamming-american-drones-in.html>.



United States. It remains to be seen if this is a genuine evolution that continues to reduce the risk of civilian casualties, or simply a byproduct of technology and environment. In conclusion, USSF cannot assume that UW training, planning, and thinking built around outdated paradigms is adequate preparation to conduct UW against a Russian CIW threat. Neither can they simply incorporate new enemy weapons capabilities as planning factors and assume the opponent is the same. Russian CIW has undergone an evolutionary transformation in the last 15 years and should be understood and trained against.

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## **X. CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

At the outset, this thesis asserted that existing paradigms (WWII and Afghanistan) have limited utility for drawing conclusions and shaping preparations for IW against a contemporary Russian threat. This research has focused on a small portion of a much larger problem set: analyzing one of the multiple potential threats USSF may encounter if they are called upon to execute IW. The subsequent implications have reverberations at the national policy level but pertain most readily to USSF.

### **A. POLICY MAKERS**

While the target audience for this research remains USSF leaders and practitioners, several implications do stand out at the policy level. The following will briefly address those before transitioning to the implications for U.S. SOF.

First and foremost, developing countries now have multiple options to provide them with foreign internal defense, security force assistance, or counter-terrorism capabilities against irregular threats.<sup>292</sup> Such choice is especially appealing to authoritarian or corrupt regimes who want a military answer to an irregular threat, but have limited interest in the oversight and pressure to reform that comes from Western support. This is especially relevant in Africa, where both Russia and China continue to increase their military involvement while the U.S. has begun to scale down.<sup>293</sup> Although training engagements and combined exercises are nothing new, the spread of Russian CIW packages into Mozambique, Central African Republic, and the recent request for Russian PMC support

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<sup>292</sup> This includes a broad range of options from both China and Russia. Whereas the Russian approach has emphasized “harder” methods such as PMCs, arms sales, and commitment of forces, the Chinese approach has incorporated “softer” imports such as the One Belt One Road investment platforms and digital surveillance technology. For an overview of some of China’s investments into Africa, reference Willem Gravett’s 2020 article “Digital Colonizer? China and Artificial Intelligence in Africa.”

<sup>293</sup> Herman Cohen, “Pulling Troops Out of Africa Could Mean Another Endless War,” War on the Rocks, May 13, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/05/pulling-troops-out-of-africa-could-mean-another-endless-war/>.

in Mali are indicative of this shift.<sup>294</sup> For the past 20 years, many of these countries' options for importing military support and security expertise consisted of the U.S. and U.S. allies such as the U.K. or France. Russia's initial attempts at exporting CIW forces on the continent have met with mixed results. However, the U.S. and its allies will increasingly need to assess which relationships (and therefore military access), they desire to maintain and which they are comfortable ceding to adversaries eager to assert influence further abroad.

Second, with increased Russian CIW deployments abroad comes increased opportunities to apply pressure against Moscow across domains and geography. The consistent violation of human rights by both indiscriminate use of fires and unaccountable PMCs opens the regime to scrutiny in the information space. The web of private and state actors enabling the expanding Russian footprint abroad also provides potential vulnerabilities for exploitation via cyber or economic levers. Any direct involvement of uniformed Russian military personnel in small wars abroad presents a significant risk to the Kremlin with its well documented aversion to Russian casualties.<sup>295</sup> Exploitation of these potential vulnerabilities requires a coherent international strategy between the U.S. and its allies. Such a strategy should apply pressure on two target audiences--developing nations (by highlighting Russian brutality), and the Russian populace (by emphasizing Russian casualties). Simply put, the more expansive the Russian efforts abroad, the more

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<sup>294</sup> Samuel Ramani, "Russia Takes Its Syrian Model of Counterinsurgency to Africa," Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), 2020, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/russia-takes-its-syrian-model-counterinsurgency-africa>.

<sup>295</sup> Theodore Gerber and Sarah Mendelson, "Casualty Sensitivity in a Post-Soviet Context: Russian Views of the Second Chechen War, 2001-2004," *Political Science Quarterly* 123, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 39–68; Lionel Beehner, "Russia Is Trying to Limit Its Casualties in Syria. Here's Why That Is Bad for Syrian Civilians.," *Washington Post*, accessed October 18, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/03/28/russia-wants-to-protect-its-troops-heres-why-that-is-bad-for-syrian-civilians/>; William Courtney, "Will Russia's Risk-Aversion Keep It Away from Ukraine?," *The Rand Blog*, April 28, 2021, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2021/04/will-russias-risk-aversion-keep-it-away-from-ukraine.html>.

pressure points become available to U.S. policy makers seeking to influence behavior in Moscow.<sup>296</sup>

## **B. U.S. SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES**

The most important takeaway for U.S. IW practitioners remains to be wary of relying on old tropes to design training and validation pipelines. While the core tenants of IW and UW may remain constant across time and geography, the operational design and tactics should reflect the current environment and threat. Russian strategic culture still has its role in their CIW operations, but the Russian military and intelligence enterprise is learning new tactical lessons which are further entrenched due to the professionalization of the forces deployed in CIW operations. The enemy is not “ten feet tall,” but he has changed his style significantly in the last decade. SF Soldiers potentially facing the Russians should adapt training to replicate this reality. With that in mind, below are three considerations for U.S. SOF training to execute IW against a Russian CIW threat:

- (1) Calls for an urban-centric approach to UW come with a distinct risk when facing an adversary such as Russia or Russian proxies. As highlighted in each of the primary case studies, Russia has historically chosen to destroy urban areas rather than fight for them. While urban areas may provide useful hubs for command or support nodes, bringing the fight to an urban area will likely result in the mass application of firepower rather than risk continued armed resistance or fighting block by block.
- (2) Unmanned Aerial Systems are a major pillar of Russian warfare and are only gaining importance and proficiency. The layered effect of strike capability from drones combined with digital command-and-control structures means the kill chain will be shorter today than it was even in Syria. Combined with the historic trend of accepting high levels of collateral damage in targeting operations, it appears likely that Russia’s irregular foes will increasingly find drones to be one of the most lethal tools deployed against them. Similarly, Russia’s emphasis on CUAS with their ongoing experimentation in conflicts such as Libya and Ukraine will mean that

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<sup>296</sup> Austin Carson explores the trade offs between a state’s decision to intervene in a conflict either overtly or covertly and advances a “limited war theory of secrecy” which sheds additional light on risks and opportunities Moscow faces as it increasingly employs its evolved CIW capabilities. Carson, Austin. *Secret Wars: Covert Conflict in International Politics* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2018).

friendly UAS will increasingly meet with capable defenses, limiting their utility.

- (3) Understanding the various Russian CIW actors is essential to understanding the threat picture. Each of the types of forces Russia arrays against irregular threats comes with distinct strengths and vulnerabilities which have significant impact on the risks to their foes. A force consisting predominately of PMCs will most likely lack significant logistic support or joint fires capabilities but will likely be less constrained in their rules of engagement. A higher presence of uniformed Spetsnaz forces may indicate an intent to conduct partnered operations but will often come with a heightened sensitivity to casualties. As Russia employs these actors, it also must balance the tension between deniability and capability. While PMC centric operations have thus far struggled to attain results without uniformed military support, deploying servicemembers reduces Moscow's ability to avoid attribution- thereby increasing the risk of either unintended escalation or humiliation.

### **C. AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

There are at least two potential branches for future research on this topic. One exploring additional depth on Russian CIW, the second broadening to include China or other rival powers in the shifting multipolar global order. Regarding Russian CIW, this research has only scratched the surface of the impacts of modernization on Russian CIW capabilities. The detailed changes to their logistical system, their close air support wings within the VVS (Russian Air Force), the status of ongoing research and development programs, and the adaptation of naval gunfire capability to CIW environments are all potential topics to pursue. The changes in Russian command and control relationships alone could constitute entire subsequent projects, particularly considering the lack of a clear understanding surrounding the relationships among the various *Spetsnaz* forces, PMCs, and the Russian military leadership. Furthermore, subsequent research could explore multiple possible scenarios in which U.S. SOF may encounter Russian CIW actors and identify which core tasks U.S. SOF should prioritize in training to prepare for executing operations against a Russian opponent. Specific scenario examples could include IW in the Baltics (and the necessary preparations), proxy war in Ukraine, and competing for influence by providing FID and SFA support to host nations in the Balkans and Central Asia.

This is to say nothing of the benefit of more detailed area-focused analyses, specifically on Africa. Then-Secretary of Defense Mark Esper’s 2020 decision to “optimize” U.S. force posture on the African continent by withdrawing forces to “prepare for great power competition” further reinforced the misconception of Africa as the periphery.<sup>297</sup> For Russian CIW, Africa is a main theater of operations. Further analysis of Russian operations in this region would be of value to U.S. forces attempting to disrupt Russian activities.

While this research is applicable for U.S. SOF practitioners concerned with the Russian threat (specifically in the EUCOM, CENTCOM, and AFRICOM AORs), a similar assessment of Chinese CIW capabilities would provide additional depth to the understanding of the potential threats U.S. SOF may encounter when executing IW in a near-peer environment. This research could use a similar approach—define the influences of strategic culture on the Chinese approach to irregular warfare, trace the most important themes through applicable case studies—and would have the added benefit of comparing the Russian and Chinese approach.

Finally, the fact remains that Russia has proven undeniably successful at defeating irregular foes. The cases of the Afghanistan and the First Chechen War serve as exceptions which prove the rule. As the U.S. military looks back on the failure of Operation Enduring Freedom and the limited success of the Operation Iraqi Freedom, it is beneficial to address the potential for approaches to countering irregular threats from outside the Western doctrinal canon. Much will likely be unsuitable for a free democratic state, but—like Russia for the last two decades—there are potentially techniques and approaches that could be adopted.

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<sup>297</sup> Aaron Mehta, “Here’s What Esper’s AFRICOM Review Has Decided So Far,” *Small Wars Journal*, 2020, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/heres-what-espers-africom-review-has-decided-so-far>.

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