



Spetsnaz: An Interview with Mark Galeotti

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In this interview Dr Galeotti discusses the history and evolution of Spetsnaz and their current use under Vladimir Putin.

The interview was originally conducted for the Remote Control project.

Q. Spetsnaz, meaning “special purpose”, is commonly understood to be an umbrella term for Russian special forces. What are the origins of Spetsnaz and what “special purpose (s)” were they originally designed for?

It may seem a subtle distinction, but there is significance to the fact that whereas in the West we tend to talk of ‘special forces,’ the Russians have historically used the term Spetsnaz, a contraction of spetsial’noe naznacheniya, ‘special designation’ or ‘special purpose.’ In other words, what is special is not so much the soldier as the role he is assigned. Reflecting this, Spetsnaz are in the main rather less ‘special’ than their Western counterparts. Even today, almost one in five is a conscript, although the aim is to have the Spetsnaz be all-professional by the end of 2018. They are also trained and configured usually to operate in larger units than their Western counterparts: companies, even battalions.

After all, while they have antecedents in the early Bolshevik Red Army, and even in the various reconnaissance and sabotage units of the Second World War, their real genesis was in the Cold War, as units able to penetrate deep into NATO territory to disrupt command and control and, above all, neutralise the tactical nuclear weapons on which the West depended to balance Warsaw Pact numerical superiority. As such, they were expeditionary forces rather than classic commandos, most analogous to US Rangers and the British Parachute Regiment.

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Over time, they acquired a greater role as 'first in' troops meant to seize bridgeheads, such as Prague and Kabul airports in the 1968 and 1979 invasions of Czechoslovakia and Afghanistan, respectively. As a clear step above Soviet conscripts, even the paratroopers, they also ended up pressed into service for tough missions that needed tough men, not least taking on the Afghan mujahideen in the hills. These were, however, secondary roles. Their main focus throughout was to be able to shatter NATO's command network and defang its tactical nuclear forces if ever the long-feared Third World War erupted.

Q. Would it be accurate to suggest that Spetsnaz were used more for political destabilisation than stabilisation missions during the Cold War? Which of these two did they prove to be more effective at?

The Soviets essentially did not practice stabilisation missions in the modern sense of the term, although they were deployed in operations to protect friendly regimes or suppress insurgencies, from fighting the rebels in Afghanistan, to training Cuba's forces after the Castro revolution. The Spetsnaz did play a certain role in some destabilisation operations, largely training and otherwise supporting anti-colonial rebels in Africa, South-East Asia and Latin America. (Of course, given that in Afghanistan they both toppled the incumbent leader and then battled the mujahideen, it is an interesting philosophical question as to whether this was a stabilisation or destabilisation operation!)

Ultimately, though, their primary mission at this time was neither: they were first and foremost deep reconnaissance and sabotage forces for a fortunately only hypothetical 'big war' in Europe, so their other missions were often more accidents of circumstance or, typically, the price they paid for being the most competent and independent-minded soldiers the Kremlin's disposal.

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Q. When the Cold War ended and the Soviet Union was broken up, did the purpose of the Spetsnaz change?

Even in the final days of the USSR, the Spetsnaz had increasingly been thrown into operations far from their original purpose, from suppressing nationalist demonstrations to securing government facilities. As one of the few Soviet forces still regarded as loyal and effective, and with training that encouraged a far higher level of autonomy and initiative than most of the Red Army, they were simply best suited to those chaotic and unpredictable times.

With the actual collapse of the USSR, Russia's Spetsnaz likewise found themselves caught between their formal roles as long-range reconnaissance, sabotage and intervention forces, and the needs of the day. They played a key role in the disastrous First Chechen War, for example, where, as in Afghanistan, a lack of able regular troops meant that they were used — misused, perhaps — often as light infantry or even VIP protection officers. With the elevation of Vladimir Putin to the presidency in 1999-2000, though, things changed. His commitment to rebuilding Russian military power slowly brought about an improvement in the regular armed forces. Meanwhile, especially since the occupation of Crimea in 2014, a new tension with the West means that the Spetsnaz have regained their old roles, but with a particular emphasis on their potential deployment in political operations. In south-eastern Ukraine, for example, they train and lead local militias, but also appear to be used to eliminate any warlords whom Moscow comes to consider inconvenient. In many ways, they are back to their old Cold War roles.

Q. There's been a lot of discussion of Russia's tactics in the Crimea and later in eastern Ukraine, with terms like 'hybrid war' and 'non-linear war'

commonly used to describe them. How important were Spetsnaz during these campaigns?

Frankly, the whole terminology is problematic, not least as ‘hybrid war’ is a term developed really to explain how a weaker power can fight a stronger one, which hardly counts in Crimea. Nonetheless, it has become the accepted term, so for the moment we are stuck with it, however much scholars and pedants (like me) may grumble. In any case, the Spetsnaz played a key role in the seizure of Crimea and still are active in eastern Ukraine.

In Crimea, Naval Spetsnaz along with other elite-but-not-so-elite forces such as the Naval Infantry (marines) formed the so-called ‘little green men’ — or ‘polite people’ in Russian parlance — who seized key buildings and communications hubs and took commanding positions near Ukrainian garrisons. The ‘local self-defence auxiliaries’, essentially local gangsters and nationalists pressed into service as a militia, provided static guard units, but the Spetsnaz were, as ever, at the tip of the spear in the actual capture of the peninsula.

In the Donbas they played a different role, more as the executive arm of the GRU (military intelligence) rather than combat troops. While they have at times been involved in direct military action, they have largely been used to train, control and deploy local militias. In a way, they are reprising their Cold War role from the Spanish Civil War through the anti-colonial uprisings after WW2, of mobilising and if need be disciplining indigenous allies. They, or their shadowy counterparts attached to the Federal Security Service, are also likely to be behind the neat and bloody assassination of several Donbas warlords, often with unlikely noms de guerre such as ‘Motorola’ and ‘Batman,’ when they became too independent-minded or greedy.

Q. There have been some serious concerns raised about the capabilities of NATO to respond effectively to the threat of what has been called ‘asymmetric’, ‘hybrid’ and ‘gray zone’ conflicts. Do you think NATO is adequately prepared to respond to these types of warfare?

The trouble with talk of ‘asymmetric’, ‘non-linear’ and similar conflict is that, in effect, this means ‘everything short of a full-scale conventional war.’ So, it could mean Crimean-style ‘little green men,’ or cyberattack, or sponsoring terrorists, or anything else one can imagine as a weapon to do what war is all about: compelling another state to do something it doesn’t want to do.

So in this context, NATO is at once strong and weak. It is actually pretty well placed to deal with the more kinetic end of the scale of threat. The Crimean ploy works once and only once, and in any case was only possible because the locals were supportive and the government in disarray. If ‘little green men’ turned up in, say, Estonia, even the local Russian-speakers would largely consider them unwelcome invaders, and the security forces would treat them in the same manner.

The problem comes as one moves into the non-kinetic forms of asymmetric conflict: cyberattacks, but even more so, political warfare. The latter is something NATO generally can’t and shouldn’t even attempt to combat. As a military alliance, it needs to focus on doing what it is meant to do well (and it does). But NATO cannot audit suspicious payments to political parties in Greece, or fine a broadcaster publishing Russian disinformation in Germany, or reconcile a disgruntled minority in Latvia. This is the job of nation states and also the EU, because these are all governance issues. By addressing them — and by appreciating that sometimes spending on counter-intelligence, media awareness and forensic accounting can be every much a security issue as

buying new aircraft or stockpiling ammunition – then the West can also minimise the points of social and political vulnerability that Moscow's political war targets.

Q: Under Putin, how much transparency and accountability has there been regarding the use of Spetsnaz?

Russia is an authoritarian state, with a few vestiges of genuine democracy, beneath a great deal of fake or partial transparency. There is no meaningful accountability of any of the security forces and services other than to Putin personally. So on the one hand there is a considerable amount of transparency when it suits the regime – they love talking up the macho capabilities of the Spetsnaz and their role as the 'polite people' who took Crimea – but this is always after the event and so long as it suits the Kremlin. There is no public discussion of their role in the Donbas, for example, and only at the end of 2016 did there start to be any recognition that they were carrying out combat missions in Syria. The Spetsnaz get talked about a great deal, and there is a solid body of books about them in Russian, but this is essentially historical and only as and when the Kremlin is pleased to see their activities publicised.

Q. Do you think that the lack of transparency and accountability makes Spetsnaz more effective?

There are inevitably times when a lack of transparency and accountability can help special forces conduct their operations: they can train and prepare with less chance of a leak, they may well be able to focus on accomplishing their mission without worrying so much about civilian casualties and the like. Viewed in purely pragmatic terms, there often seems to be a trade-off between democratic accountability and operational effectiveness. However, this is not

generally a decisive factor, and there are also distinct downsides. Less accountability can also mean less pressure to do due diligence on a mission, to ensure it is worthwhile and achievable. It can also mean forces may become more inclined to act on their own initiative and rely on clemency after the event. In Afghanistan, for example, this led to some unsanctioned cross-border incursions into Pakistan that could have gone very badly. More recently, the Kremlin's capacity to control its domestic media has made it easier for it to send Spetsnaz into Syria, and in the process sucked it deeper into a conflict unlikely to have a quick or easy resolution.

Q. It has been reported that the Special Operations Command (KSO) have been conducting counter-insurgency operations in Syria. Some have argued that the KSO have been modelled on the British SAS and the US Delta Force. Does the recent creation of KSO suggest that Russia will be committed to waging this type of “covert warfare” for the long-term?

Absolutely: when the General Staff decided on the formation of the KSO in 2010, it was with the understanding that they needed a true Tier One special operations unit, not just the expeditionary forces the regular Spetsnaz largely represent. The close links between the KSO and the GRU have since then been strengthened, making them explicitly designed not just for regular combat and counter-insurgency missions but also for covert, political ones. As such, they occupy in some ways a middle ground between the SAS and Delta on the one hand, and the tactical elements of the CIA Special Activities Division's Political Action Group on the other.

Q. In terms of military spending, where do you see Russia prioritising in the future? Will it continue to develop the means to wage “conventional

warfare” or will it focus on developing methods of waging more covert forms of warfare, such as the use special operations troops?

The Russians do not see this as an either/or choice, as the covert and political is meant to be integrated seamlessly into the overt and conventional. Their notion of ‘new generation warfare’ – within which fits what we in the West persist in calling ‘hybrid warfare’ – is precisely that special operations forces, intelligence agencies, propaganda and the like are all military assets to be deployed in the preparatory stages to weaken an enemy, just as much as during the shooting. To this end, given that so long as Putin is in the Kremlin spending on the military will continue to be a priority, I expect that we will see considerable effort in making sure that Russia develops across the entire spectrum of military capabilities, from nuclear to covert. Given that the Spetsnaz are also able to operate across that spectrum, whether arming local insurgents or shattering enemy strategic command networks, they will undoubtedly remain crucial assets and treated accordingly.

Image credit: Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation/Wikimedia

Dr Mark Galeotti is a specialist on Russian security affairs, intelligence, organised crime and similar murky topics. He is a senior researcher at UMV, the [Institute of International Relations Prague](#), where he is the coordinator of its [Centre for European Security](#). He is also principal director of the consultancy [Mayak Intelligence](#). Previously, he was Professor of Global Affairs at New



York University, was attached to the British Foreign & Commonwealth Office, as an adviser on post-Soviet security issues, and has also worked with many government and non-government agencies, including currently being a visiting fellow with the European Council on Foreign Relations. He has also been a visiting professor at Rutgers—Newark (USA), Charles University (Prague), and MGIMO (Moscow). He read history at Robinson College, Cambridge University and then took his doctorate in

politics at the London School of Economics, after a brief time working in the City of London. He has published widely, with 15 authored and edited books to his name; his most recent are *Hybrid War or Gibrinaya Voina? Getting Russia's non-linear military challenge right* (Mayak, 2016) and *The Modern Russian Army* (Osprey, 2017). He also blogs at *In Moscow's Shadows* and writes in the academic, professional and popular press, as well as the recent ECFR reports *Putin's Hydra: inside Russia's intelligence services* and *Heavy Metal Diplomacy: Russia's political use of its military in Europe since 2014*. He is the Founding Editor of the journal *Global Crime* and a contributing editor to *IntelliNews Business New Europe*.

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