

SECURITY INSIGHTS



Spetsnaz: Operational Intelligence, Political Warfare, and Battlefield Role

By Mark Galeotti

Executive Summary

- Russia's *Spetsnaz* [Special Designation] forces are light infantry forces that are largely configured for reconnaissance, counterinsurgency, and power-projection missions, more comparable to the U.S. 75th Ranger Regiment or the British 16th Air Assault Brigade than to true special forces. Russia's Special Operations Forces Command, however, is a genuine special forces unit.
- *Spetsnaz* missions vary from battlefield reconnaissance and behind-the-lines sabotage to training guerrillas and, increasingly, supporting allied regimes against insurgencies and protests. They have played a significant role in all recent deployments, including in Crimea, the Donbas, and Syria.
- *Spetsnaz* forces are especially geared toward "political warfare" operations, reflecting Moscow's particular interest in integrating conventional military missions with covert "active measures."

Although there are other elite units, such as the paratroopers' 45th Guards Independent Reconnaissance Regiment and the Federal Security Service's *Al'fa* antiterrorist teams, the *Spetsnaz* (the term is a contraction of *spetsial'noe naznacheniya*, "of special purpose" or "of special designation") remain the primary elite forces of the Russian military.¹ They are part of the military intelligence;² although *Spetsnaz* forces are considered a strategic asset, they are "lent" to territorial commands for operational deployment in times of war, subject to the final authority of the General Staff.

¹ For general studies, see Tor Bukkvoll, "Military Innovation Under Authoritarian Government –The Case of Russian Special Operations Forces," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 38, no. 5 (2015); Roger McDermott, "Putin's Secret Force Multiplier: Special Operations Forces," *Jamestown Foundation Eurasia Daily Monitor*, April 26, 2016, <https://jamestown.org/program/putins-secret-force-multiplier-special-operations-forces/>; and Mark Galeotti, *Spetsnaz: Russia's Special Forces* (New York: Osprey, 2015).

² Russia's military intelligence is now known as the Main Directorate (GU: *Glavnoe upravlenie*) of the General Staff, even though it still is widely known as the GRU, its old title.

The Spetsnaz originally were shaped by the Cold War, as strategic assets who could be deployed deep behind North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) lines, especially to target tactical nuclear weapons and command structures. Thus, they had to combine the capacity to be inserted stealthily by land, air, or sea and to be both scouts and strikers. This combination of missions meant that although the forces largely were made up of conscripts (even if they were the pick of the crop), they had to be able to operate with far greater initiative than most other Soviet units. As a result, they also ended up playing a disproportionate role in the Soviet war in Afghanistan (1979–1989), both Chechen wars (1994–1996 and 1999–2009), and recent foreign adventures, including Georgia (2009), Crimea (2014), the Donbas intervention (2014–present), and Syria (2015–present).³

At present, there are as many as 17,000 Spetsnaz, although this figure must be qualified. They are undoubtedly an elite unit within the Russian military, but there are elites and there are elites. The Spetsnaz still include conscripts serving one-year terms, although these conscripts are the pick of the draft and often have some pre-service experience from military-patriotic classes or the Young Army movement. There have been serious efforts to make the Spetsnaz an all-volunteer force, and although this still has not been accomplished, they are closer to this target than the rest of the military: The Special Operations Forces Command (KSSO: *Komandovanie Sil Spetsial'nykh Operatsiy*)⁴ and some brigades are now all-volunteer, whereas other forces are perhaps 70 percent to 80 percent professional.

Overall, it is best and most accurate to compare them with other mobile, light infantry intervention forces, such as the U.S. 75th Ranger Regiment or the British 16th Air Assault Brigade, rather than with Tier One, true special operations forces. Such a designation ought to be reserved for high-readiness, high-status elements, such as the reconnaissance companies in regular Spetsnaz brigades, the combat swimmers in the Naval Spetsnaz, and (above all) the KSSO; taken together, these forces number more than 1,000 men.

There are seven regular Independent Special Designation Brigades (OBrSN: *Otdel'naya Brigada Spetsial'nogo naznacheniya*), along with the 100th Brigade (which is a combat unit but especially is involved in testing new weapons and tactics), the 25th Independent Special Designation Regiment, and the Special Operations Command. Brigades comprise two or more Independent Special Designation Detachments (OOSN: *Otdelnyi Otryad Spetsial'nogo naznacheniya*),⁵ which are, in effect, regiments of around 500 effectives, although the details of establishment strength, equipment, and training vary depending on local conditions or missions. Each of the four fleets has an Independent Naval Reconnaissance Spetsnaz Point (OMRPSn: *Otdel'nyi Morskoy Razvedyvatelnyi Punkt Spetsial'nogo naznacheniya*), a brigade-strength unit of varying composition, with a maximum size of some 1,400 operators.

³ For studies of past Spetsnaz operations, see Aleksey Nikolsky, “Little, Green and Polite: The Creation of Russian Special Operations Forces,” in *Brothers Armed: Military Aspects of the Crisis in Ukraine*, ed. Colby Howard and Ruslan Pukhov (Minneapolis: East View Press, 2014); Tor Bukkvoll, “Russian Special Operations Forces in Crimea and Donbas,” *Parameters* 46, no. 2 (2016); and Mark Galeotti, *Storm-333: The Soviets Take Kabul* (New York: Osprey, forthcoming: 2020).

⁴ Also sometimes referred to as the KSO or SSO.

⁵ Sometimes referred to as OSN, for *Otryad Spetsial'nogo naznacheniya*, or Special Designation Detachment.

As for the KSSO, this strategic-level asset officially became operational in 2013 and experienced its baptism of fire during the 2014 Crimean annexation. It is built around the 346th Independent Spetsnaz Brigade, which is a “light” force of just a single OOSN, with perhaps 500 operators. However, it also has its own integral helicopter squadron with Mi-8/17 assault transports and Ka-50/52 gunships, based at Torzhok airbase (home of the 344th Army Aviation Combat Training Center), and a designated airlift squadron.⁶

The distinctiveness of the Spetsnaz is, in part, a reflection of the Russian operational code, which has shaped the country’s way of war and thus the requirements it places on its forces. A strategic worldview that sees Russia under constant threat of both invasion and subversion has led to a particular blurring of the boundaries between war and peace. This worldview, combined with an understanding of the strength of NATO as Russia’s primary potential antagonist and the perceived need for Russia to find ways to reassert itself on the wider world stage, has contributed to the emergence of the Spetsnaz’s particular roles as power-projection assets and forces that support wider campaigns of covert intelligence-gathering and subversion.

Scouts and Saboteurs

By virtue of their flexibility and capacity to be deployed quickly and deeply, the *Spetsnaz* continue to be the “tip of the spear,” used to reconnoiter and clear the route for their heavier and slower but more-survivable regular comrades. Like any special forces, they can strike hard but are dangerously fragile when unable to rely on their usual assets of speed, stealth, and surprise. Once the *polite people* (the Russians’ term for the so-called little green men) had launched their coup de main in Crimea, for example, they were quickly supplemented and, in some areas, replaced by regular mechanized forces of the 727th Independent Naval Infantry Battalion, the 291st Artillery Brigade, and the 18th Independent Motor Rifle Brigade.⁷ The reasoning for the replacements was that the Ukrainians might rally and launch a response against which the Spetsnaz and their motley “local self-defense force” auxiliaries would be hard-pressed to resist.

In the Donbas since 2014, the Spetsnaz have been used for a mix of roles: sometimes battlefield reconnaissance and combat support but often more-political missions. In particular, they (or their counterparts from the Federal Security Service) are widely assumed to have been behind the assassinations of several more-independent-minded or otherwise troublesome local militia commanders, although these deaths are officially blamed on Kyiv. Just as the conventional

⁶ Aleksey Nikolsky, “Russian Special Operations Forces: Further Development or Stagnation?” *Moscow Defence Brief*, no. 2 (2014); Aleksei Mikhailov, “Boitsy chetverogo izmereniya,” *Voенно-promyshlennyi kur’er*, April 18, 2016, <https://www.vpk-news.ru/articles/30319>; Roger McDermott, “Russia’s Special Operations Forces Command and the Strategy of Limited Actions,” *Jamestown Foundation Eurasia Daily Monitor*, May 21, 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/russias-special-operations-forces-command-and-the-strategy-of-limited-actions/>.

⁷ Colby Howard and Ruslan Pukhov, eds., *Brothers Armed: Military Aspects of the Crisis in Ukraine* (Minneapolis: East View Press, 2014).

battalion tactical groups tend to be composite forces drawn from several brigades, the Spetsnaz deployment also appears to be of elements, often no more than squad or platoon strength and coming from several brigades, including the KSSO's 346th.⁸

More generally, they retain their role in long-term deep and battlefield surveillance and reconnaissance missions. The Naval Spetsnaz also play an aggressive role in northern European waters. Since the Cold War, the Northern Fleet's 420th OMRPSn has trained for operations against NATO's Sound Surveillance System underwater listening stations across the Greenland–Iceland–United Kingdom (GIUK) gap. Likewise, after an apparent hiatus in the 1990s and early 2000s, the Baltic Fleet's 561st OMRPSn is once again involved in covert operations in Baltic and Scandinavian territorial waters.⁹ This role in northern European Waters is not confined to maritime operations: There is considerable evidence that Spetsnaz forces have, from time to time, ventured onto Norway's Svalbard archipelago, whether for reconnaissance or simply to make a point, given that some in Moscow have hinted at territorial claims.¹⁰

Tourists and Trainers

In Soviet times, the Spetsnaz (or their forebears) often were deployed covertly abroad to support insurgencies, such as the Republicans fighting Francisco Franco in the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), various anticolonial struggles (including Angola and Vietnam), and in Afghanistan. In an interesting reversal, the Kremlin's current position that it is the true upholder of national sovereignty against an intrusive, U.S.-dominated “unipolar” world order means that it is more likely to be sending its forces in support of standing (if often unpleasant) regimes, offering training, physical protection, and sometimes even battle, although this role now is more likely to be assumed by the Wagner Group or other Russian private military and security companies.¹¹

With such support, Russia is continuing a traditional, if initially informal, Spetsnaz role. Soviet doctrine assumed (or at least declared) that Moscow would never be fighting counterinsurgency operations, which it considered to be a sin of the imperialist West. Of course, it often did, from suppressing the *Basmachi* risings in Central Asia in the 1920s and 1930s to operating against partisans resisting annexation in the postwar Baltic states.¹² Even in the case of Afghanistan,

⁸ The roles and structure of Spetsnaz forces, especially in the conflict in Ukraine, are explored in more depth in Mark Galeotti, “The Rising Influence of Russian Special Forces,” *Jane's Intelligence Review*, November 24, 2014.

⁹ Nils-Ove Jansson, “Submarine Intrusions in Swedish Waters: Past and Present,” *Kungl*, no. 1, 2016, https://kkrya.se/hot/2016%3A1/jansson_subm_intrusions.pdf; Martin Hurt, “Russia Continues to Test Western Resolve – Spetsnaz Units Operating in Norwegian Territory,” *International Centre for Defence and Security Blog*, October 3, 2019, <https://icds.ee/russia-continues-to-test-western-resolve-spetsnaz-units-operating-in-norwegian-territory/>.

¹⁰ Tat'yana Britskaya, “Po rabote ezdili,” *Novaya Gazeta*, October 1, 2019,

<https://novyagazeta.ru/articles/2019/10/02/82194-po-rabote-ezdili>; Sergei Sukhankin, “Russian Spetsnaz in Norway: ‘Fake News’ Versus Facts,” *Jamestown Foundation Eurasia Daily Monitor*, October 9, 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/russian-spetsnaz-in-norway-fake-news-versus-facts/>.

¹¹ Kimberly Marten, “Russia's Use of Semi-State Security Forces: The Case of the Wagner Group,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 35, no. 3 (2019).

¹² Mark Galeotti, “Hybrid, Ambiguous, and Non-Linear? How New Is Russia's ‘New Way of War’?” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27, no. 2 (2016).

reality and orthodoxy spent much time in competition, and the post-Soviet line was strikingly similar. As a result, much of the hard-earned lessons of Afghanistan were ignored and had to be relearned in Chechnya; as ever, it was the Spetsnaz, with their greater flexibility of thought and action, who were often at the heart of this process. At last, Moscow has come to terms with the fact that, from the North Caucasus today to potential operations in Central Asia or beyond tomorrow, it must be ready for counterinsurgency and low-intensity conflicts.

These roles, and the new political commitment to actively support the sovereignty of allied states against foreign and domestic threats, result in a growing role for the Spetsnaz in training and fighting alongside allied forces or signaling Russian commitment. In Syria, for example, although the media often mistakenly identify Naval Infantry, Military Police, or private military company operators as Spetsnaz, there is sufficient hard evidence to demonstrate that they have been playing a role since the very beginning.¹³ The deployment there appears to be of around 250 men drawn from several units, including some KSSO operators, as well as Naval Spetsnaz from the 431st OMRPSn. Some are tasked with security for especially high-value officers and locations, but overall they are conducting specialist operations, such as directing air and artillery strikes and recovering downed Russian airmen.¹⁴

Although the reports of Moscow's deployments to Venezuela in 2019 were often exaggerated and contradictory—sometimes thanks to judicious Russian media management—there appear to have been some Spetsnaz along with the Wagner Group mercenaries and technical specialists sent in March of that year. Some were tasked with providing training for Venezuelan forces, although most appear to have been providing security for Russian facilities and personnel and were withdrawn by the end of the year. Regardless of their actual impact on the ground, which is likely to have been extremely limited, their presence in Venezuela at a time when Washington was stepping up its pressure on Caracas was a distinct and deliberate political signal, one which the Russians (rightly or wrongly) appear to have believed was successful in cooling U.S. zeal for regime change.¹⁵

¹³ "Itogi Spetsial'noi Operatsii v Sirii," *Krasnaya Zvezda*, December 24, 2017, <http://archive.redstar.ru/index.php/newspaper/item/35500-itogi-spetsialnoj-operatsii-v-sirii>; Mark Galeotti, "The Three Faces of Russian Spetsnaz in Syria," *War on the Rocks*, March 21, 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/03/the-three-faces-of-russian-spetsnaz-in-syria/>; Sarah Fainberg, *Russian Spetsnaz, Contractors, and Volunteers in the Syrian Conflict* (Paris: Ifri, December 2017), https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/fainberg_russian_spetsnaz_syrian_conflict_2017.pdf.

¹⁴ Anton Mardasov, "What Are Russian Special Operations Forces Doing in Idlib?" *Al Jazeera*, August 29, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/russian-special-operations-forces-idlib-190828144800497.html>.

¹⁵ According to conversations in Moscow in the second half of 2019.

Political Warfare

Thus, the Spetsnaz are not just a combat asset but also are a weapon of active measures and political warfare, able to operate in the murky intersection of conflict, politics, intelligence, and propaganda. Although he was describing what he believed to be Western practice, this role was implicit when Chief of the General Staff Valeryi Gerasimov wrote in his now infamous 2013 article how

the role of nonmilitary means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown . . . supplemented by military means of a concealed character, including carrying out actions of informational conflict and the actions of special-operations forces. The open use of forces—often under the guise of peacekeeping and crisis regulation—is resorted to only at a certain stage, primarily for the achievement of final success in the conflict.¹⁶

In Syria, the Spetsnaz essentially are counterinsurgency warfighting assets. In Crimea, they conducted a coup de main. In the Donbas, they primarily are deniable assets used to maintain Moscow’s authority over the ramshackle and often undisciplined local militias. In Venezuela, they were political tokens. Although the Russian military is first and foremost dedicated to preparing how to fight and win conventional war against peer competitors, the importance of political warfare in Russian strategic thinking—especially on the part of the civilian national security community and in the Security Council secretariat—means that a force able to operate in this “gray zone,” to use the current jargon, will continue to be considered a strategic priority.¹⁷

Annex: Spetznaz Units

Note: A question mark indicates that reports vary as to its precise location or designation.

2nd Brigade (Promezhitsa, Pskov)

- 177th OOSn (Taibol)
- 186th OOSn
- ? OOSn (reports vary as to whether this has been disbanded)
- 1071st Training Regiment (Pechora)

3rd Guards Brigade (Tolyatti)

- 226th? OOSn
- ? OOSn

¹⁶ Valeryi Gerasimov, “Tsennost’ nauki v predvidenii,” *Voенно-promyshlennyi kur’er*, February 26, 2013.

¹⁷ Mark Galeotti, “Active Measures: Russia’s Covert Geopolitical Operations,” George C. Marshall Center for Security Studies, Strategic Insights no. 31 (June 2019), <https://www.marshallcenter.org/MCPUBLICWEB/en/nav-fix-sec-insights/173-cat-english-en/cat-publications-en/cat-pubs-security-insights-abstracts-en/2742-active-measures-russias-covert-geopolitical-operations.html>.

10th Brigade (Molkino)

- ? OOSn
- ? OOSn
- ? OOSn

14th Brigade (Ussurisk)

- 282nd OOSN (Ussurisk)
- 294 OOSn (Khabarovsk)
- 308th OOSn
- 314th OOSn

16th Brigade (Chuchkogo/Tambov, Moscow)

- 370th OOSn (Chuchkogo)
- ? OOSn
- 664th OOSn (Protasovo)

22nd Guards Brigade (Aksai/Stepnoi)

- 173rd OOSn
- 411th OOSn

24th Brigade (Irkutsk)

- 281st OOSn (Novosibirsk)
- 297th OOSn (Berdsk)

Other

- 100th Brigade (Mozdok)
- 25th Independent Spetsnaz Regiment (Stavropol)

Special Operations Command

- 346th Independent Spetsnaz Brigade (Prokhladny)
- Helicopter Attack and Transport Squadron (Torzhok)
- Aviation Transport Squadron (Tver-Migalovo)
- Senezh Training and Operations Center (Solnechnogorsk)

Naval Spetsnaz

- 42nd Independent Naval Reconnaissance Spetsnaz Point (Vladivostok, Pacific Fleet)
- 420th Independent Naval Reconnaissance Spetsnaz Point (Severomorsk, Northern Fleet)
- 431st Independent Naval Reconnaissance Spetsnaz Point (Sevastopol, Black Sea Fleet)
- 561st Independent Naval Reconnaissance Spetsnaz Point (Parusnoe, Kaliningrad, Baltic Fleet)

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