



Russian Spetsnaz - Ukraine's Deniable 'Little Green Men'

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In February 2013 the influential Moscow based 'Military Industrial Courier', published an article by Russia's Chief of the General Staff, army General Valery Gerasimov. He explained, *"That a perfectly striving country can, in a matter of months or even days, be transformed into an area of fierce armed conflict, become a victim of foreign intervention and sink into a web of chaos, humanitarian catastrophe and civil war..."*

He also said, this devastation need not be kinetic. The role of the non-military elements for achieving political and strategic goals has grown and in many cases they have exceeded the force of weapons in their effectiveness. All this is achieved by military means of a 'concealed' nature and include acts of information conflict and special operation forces.

The military doctrine promoted by Gerasimov and endorsed by Vladimir Putin resulted in the use of Spetsnaz troops: the deniable 'little green men' in the guise of local security forces who created the illusion of legitimacy- Ukrainians wanted to be part of Russia! This was also an element of psychological warfare – local journalists did not know whether these men would answer questions or shoot them.

As intended, Spetsnaz troops created ambiguity: it allowed Russia to deny any involvement in the Ukraine conflict and was also designed to create a climate of indecision among multinational organisations such as NATO, the EU and political systems based on the principles of consensus, when deciding on what actions to take.

While NATO and the 24 hour news cycle concentrated on Russian military forces on the Ukraine border, the 'deniable' Spetsnaz troops were quietly escalating tensions, engaged in subversion, training pro-Russian sympathizers and conducting reconnaissance throughout Ukraine. Without raising the Russian flag they created the conditions for a proxy-war and guided so-called separatists to achieve the objectives set out by the Kremlin. Stealth, rather than conventional military forces was used to further the objectives of deniable participation in the invasion of an independent state.

What is Spetsnaz?

Until the late 1990s the main source of information about Spetsnaz came from the writer Victor Suvorov. In 1987 he published 'Spetsnaz: The inside Story of the Soviet Union'. Victor Suvorov, whose real name is Vladimir Bogdanovich Rezum, claimed to have served as a Spetsnaz officer.

Born in 1947, Rezum trained as a military officer in Kalinin and Kyiv, but there is no evidence of him serving with Spetsnaz forces. After studying at the Soviet Diplomatic Academy, in 1974 he served as a major in the Soviet Military Intelligence (GRU) and worked under diplomatic cover from the Soviet Embassy in Geneva. In 1978 Major Rezum defected to England and was subsequently sentenced to death by the Soviet Supreme Court for treason.

Although he undoubtedly knows the inner workings of the GRU during the Soviet period, his knowledge of Spetsnaz has been called into question. In light of the continued effectiveness of Russia's Spetsnaz forces in Ukraine and other former Soviet states there is a need to review our understanding of these forces which have undergone extensive restructuring under Putin's leadership.

Spetsnaz (special designation or special purpose troops) are often wrongly considered to be the equivalent to western Special Forces. Although in comparison with Russia's conventional forces they can be considered elite, they should not be regarded as being at tier one Special Forces level: it is their capability of engaging in ambiguous political-military operations such as that in Ukraine, not the quality of their soldiers. (See [DUST](#) March 2015)

operations such as that in Ukraine, not the quality of their soldiers. (See *KUSI March 2015*, Igor Sutyagin)

The word Spetsnaz is not confined to the Russian military and has been used to describe special designation troops in all the Soviet states and the name is still used today. We also find the western image of an all-male military formation is not correct. As Suvorov said in 1987, these units also have a large number of women who have undergone the same training and possess the same skills as their male counterparts. This is supported by the arrest of two female Spetsnaz operators by the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) and several reports of females acting as agent provocateurs in Maiden Square. The Russian government also makes no secret of their female operatives. For instance, on 21 September 2013, RT released a video of 35 women undergoing Spetsnaz training and reported that 600 soldiers, including 150 women had completed the course at the Southern Military District in the Krasnodar region. (For further reading see my post 'Russian Clandestine Operations in Ukraine', 13 April, 2015)

Political Operators- active measures/ political warfare

Although there continues to be limited verifiable information coming out of eastern Ukraine, through the indiscreet use of social media, personal and Russian patriotic websites we see that female Spetsnaz operative played, and continue to play key roles in Ukraine and are officially regarded as essential within the broad concept of 'political warfare'. A case in point is the capture of Maria Koleda by the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) in 2014, and the activities of Yulia Kharlamova of the 38th Separate Parachute Brigade, which I covered in an earlier post.

Maria Koleda before being captured by the SBU

During the 2006 restructuring of the armed forces Spetsnaz was completely transformed in order to create a deniable military force capable of employing Gerasimov's 'new' military doctrine, which has variously been described as non-linear warfare, hybrid warfare,



Maria Koleda before being captured by the SBU

During the 2006 restructuring of the armed forces Spetsnaz was completely transformed in order to create a deniable military force capable of employing Gerasimov's 'new' military doctrine, which has variously been described as non-linear warfare, hybrid warfare, asymmetric warfare and political warfare. To simplify this military strategy, Jane's Intelligence Review of 2014, described Spetsnaz as an, "element of this military doctrine responsible for waging war below the radar of traditional collective intelligence"

While the restructuring included the introduction of new weapons, technology and integrating the Gerasimov tactics and concepts into their operational roles, Spetsnaz is still responsible for sabotage, reconnaissance, intelligence gathering; the assassination of political leaders and military officers. These units are also tools of the Russian intelligence communities. Although separate from the Ministry of Defence and reporting directly to Military Intelligence (GRU) they work closely with the FSB. Consequently, they may be referred to as Spetsnaz GRU or Spetsnaz FSB depending on what organisation they are assigned to. This became apparent after the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) captured both FSB and GRU Spetsnaz operatives.

Ukraine

There have been several reports of Spetsnaz troops in eastern Ukraine operating at platoon strength and these are said to be elements from five independent brigades- the 346 of the Special Operations Command (KSO), 2nd, 22nd, and 24th Spetsnaz brigades. Of particular interest are recent reports of the 100th Brigade operating in eastern Ukraine.

Although fully operational, because the 100th Brigade is currently tasked with training, testing new weapons and technology, they are ideally suited for training separatist militias, including instruction in the use of heavy weapons. This may account for the increased efficiency of the pro-Russian militias which are said to mainly consist of ill-disciplined terrorists and Russian mercenaries.

Each brigade has its own communications unit and during the 2006 restructuring and modernization program emphasis was placed on enhancing their signals intelligence capabilities. According to recent reports which have been supported by captured documents and photographs, a Spetsnaz Sigint unit has been operating in Syria and this has resulted in

the increased accuracy of government air strikes and artillery fire against rebel leaders. In light of these documents, which are still to be independently verified, it has to be assumed the same capabilities are being employed in Ukraine.

Spetsnaz has proved capable of operating in politically and operationally complex environments and paving the way for conventional military forces. For instance, Spetsnaz ensured the 727th Independent Naval Infantry Brigade and the 18th Independent Motorized Brigade and other regular forces entered Ukraine with minimum opposition from government forces.

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Good article. Agree that many Spetznatz not Tier 1 SF. Some smaller Spetznatz units assigned to FSB, GRU and operating detached to SVR are.

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