

**Conflict Studies Research Centre**



**Russia's  
Special Forces**

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## **Key Points**

- \* Russia's cutting edge of its anti-terrorist struggle are her special forces.
- \* Russia is potentially an important partner in the anti-terrorist struggle, a fact not recognised by many countries.
- \* The inordinate proliferation of special forces units in Russia requires a guided tour through her anti-terrorist mechanisms, especially for those who may seek cooperation with Moscow in the future.
- \* Russian special forces may be tasked with missions which would be found highly controversial by liberal democracies, whose struggle with terrorists is often regarded by Moscow as half-hearted and hypocritical.

# Russia's Special Forces

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## **Special Only for Stalin**

The history of the Soviet/Russian special forces has, until the most recent events in Chechnya, run on two parallel tracks: one, the sword and shield of the leaders in the Kremlin, belonged to the Soviet and Russian security apparatus; the other, subordinate to the Ministry of Defence and tasked to attack NATO strategic objects, was formed much later.

The VChK (vserossiyskaya cherezvychaynaya komissiya po borbe s kontrrevolutsiei i sabotazhem) – the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counterrevolution and Sabotage, one of the predecessors of the much better known KGB, established its own Special Purpose Detachment (otryad osobogo naznacheniya – OSNAZ) in April 1921. The unit included a battalion HQ, three rifle companies, a signal detachment, an administrative detachment, a train and a cavalry squadron, in all 1,097 fighters and commanders.<sup>1</sup> After several structural adjustments, on 17 June 1925, the detachment, which had grown considerably since its inception, became a division consisting of three regiments. In 1926 the division was reformed again and named after Feliks Edmundovich Dzerzhinskiy, the father of the Soviet security apparatus. It was called the independent special purpose division (otdelnaya divizya osobogo naznacheniya - ODon) and comprised 4,436 people.<sup>2</sup>

Although the USSR was the first country to form airborne forces - the official birth of the Soviet airborne troops is 2<sup>nd</sup> August 1930, the date of the first successful jump by 12 paratroopers, and the continuing experiments were followed by the gradual establishment of airborne units – their special status lay only in the fact that they were airborne, not that they were used in special operations. The first two airborne units were formed in the Leningrad Military District in 1931. In January 1932 a decision was taken to set up one airborne detachment each in the Moscow, Leningrad, Ukrainian and Belorussian military districts (MD). The largest was the No 3 Detachment of the Leningrad MD. The Ukrainian MD special detachment had 30 troopers and the remaining two military districts had to postpone their plans because of a shortage of suitable personnel. By 1939 the USSR officially had five air assault brigades and plans were made to increase their size to a corps.<sup>3</sup>

Stalin distrusted the Army, which may have been one of the reasons why its special combat units were never developed sufficiently – if they were to be able to descend unexpectedly on a distant enemy they were capable of descending unexpectedly on him. Those who acquired sabotage and guerrilla experience in the Spanish Civil War were used mainly by the powerful Soviet security organs. Even after the German attack on the USSR in June 1941, the NKVD, as the renamed and expanded VChK was then called, was in charge of most Soviet special operations. On 26 June 1941, that is four days after the German invasion of the Soviet Union,

Lavrenti Beria, one of Stalin's closest collaborators, signed an order setting up a special forces group of the NKVD. At the beginning of October 1941, the group was transformed into an independent special purpose motor rifle brigade of the NKVD (otdelnaya motostrelkovaya brigada osobogo naznacheniya – OMSBON) which consisted of two motor rifle regiments, four independent companies, a reconnaissance-sabotage detachment and a school of junior commanders and specialists. The Brigade numbered 10,500 people. Its main tasks were:

- the support of the Red Army,
- assistance in the development of a mass guerrilla movement,
- conducting all forms of intelligence work and
- counterintelligence operations.

In October 1943, OMSBON was once again reformed and renamed the special purpose detachment (otryad osobogo naznacheniya – OSNAZ). When the war ended, in spite of the sudden expansion of Soviet influence in Eastern and Central Europe and armed resistance in many areas occupied by the Red Army, Stalin decided that OSNAZ was not needed, and the unit was disbanded in November 1945.<sup>4</sup>

## **The Second Birth of the Soviet Special Forces**

Worried by the USA's nuclear capabilities, in 1952 Stalin accepted the need to set up Army special purpose mobile reconnaissance and sabotage units (spetsnaz) capable of neutralising nuclear forces in the enemy rear. On 24 October 1952, in accordance with the directive 2/395832 of the Soviet Minister of Defence and the Chief of the General Staff, the forming of Independent Special Purpose Companies (otdelnyye roty spetsialnogo naznacheniya – ORSN) began in selected armies and in military districts. Very soon the Soviet Army had 46 such companies, all subordinated to the 5<sup>th</sup> Directorate of the Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) of the General Staff. Each company consisted of 120 troops of various ranks serving in four platoons, of which three were combat and one a signal platoon. The signal platoons were capable of intercepting telephone and radio communication.<sup>5</sup> The general reduction of the Soviet armed forces of the early 1950s was accompanied by a reduction of the special forces units. In 1953, the Soviet Army had 11 special purpose companies.

At the beginning of 1957, Defence Minister Marshal Zhukov, ordered the formation of five special forces battalions (otdelnyye bataliony spetsialnogo naznacheniya – OBSP). They were subordinate to the commanders of military districts and the Soviet groups of forces based outside the USSR. Zhukov also ordered a school for special forces to be set up in the city of Tambov – a project which never took off as Zhukov was slowly pushed aside and then retired.

Just before the Cuban crisis of 1963, army spetsnaz was reformed again. The commanders of the military districts were instructed to form a total of 10 spetsnaz brigades. The skeleton brigades were manned by professional personnel but were to be reinforced, in case of war, by reservists, when they would be expected to have 1,700 troops. By January 1963 the USSR had several independent “spetsnaz” companies, 5 battalions and 10 brigades.<sup>6</sup> In 1968, the Ryazan Airborne School set up the 9<sup>th</sup> company to train special forces personnel and in 1977 the M V Frunze Military Academy opened a faculty for special forces officers.

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By 1979 the number of special forces brigades on Soviet territory had grown to 14. There were also 30 independent spetsnaz units based in individual armies and groups of forces outside the USSR.<sup>7</sup> These units were to be supported in case of all out conflicts by Warsaw Pact allies with their own networks but whose targets were determined by the Warsaw Pact High Command, ie by Moscow.<sup>8</sup> Until 1979 the Army special forces units had essentially two principal tasks: reconnaissance operations and special tasks which included sabotage, assaults on vital military bases, power stations, military and civilian airfields and the elimination of foreign leaders and commanders. Some of the special forces units took part in the invasion of Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968. However only the war in Afghanistan tested their skills to the limit, although officers of special forces units took part in military conflicts, usually as observers and consultants, in more than 20 countries around the world.<sup>9</sup>

The security apparatus, renamed the KGB, began to form its special forces in 1955. The KGB set up a special department, at the First Chief Directorate (Intelligence) and put it in charge of the Independent Special Purpose Brigade (otdelnaya brigada osobogo naznacheniya - OBON), expected to continue the old traditions of the wartime OMSBON, to train sabotage groups for future armed conflicts, with 4,500 people in six operational regiments and one operational battalion. The brigade had several test ranges around the Soviet Union and the training centre in Balashikha where the Soviet security apparatus had trained its personnel since 1936. The special department trained the KGB wartime special reserve. The training functions of the special department were taken over in 1969<sup>10</sup> by Advanced Officers Courses (kursy usovershenstvovaniya ofiterskogo sostava - KUOS). During a seven month course the students were taught the use of firearms, parachuting, mountain climbing, handling explosives, topography, guerrilla warfare and other equally energetic subjects. Annually the course prepared about 60 special forces commanders of the KGB to operate in the enemy's deep rear.<sup>11</sup> Some of the "graduates" of the course were stationed in Russian embassies but this was partly phased out after the defection to the UK in the early 1960s of one of the alumni of the special department, KGB officer Oleg Lyalin, and in response to the slow changes in Soviet foreign policy. The courses continued until the early 1990s and provided officers for several KGB special forces units for military operations and security training in Afghanistan.<sup>12</sup>

### **Alfa, Vitaz, Kobalt, Vympel & Afghanistan**

Until the early 1970s, all Soviet special forces were trained for missions abroad. The growth of international terrorism but also the successes of the West German anti-terrorist group GSG-9 and similar groups in other countries convinced the Soviet leadership that the USSR should also have a such a team.

The decision to form the super secret anti-terrorist detachment "A", known today as Alfa, was taken by the Soviet Politburo on 28 July 1974.<sup>13</sup> Yuriy Andropov, the head of the KGB, issued order No 0089/0V, to form the A section of the 7<sup>th</sup> KGB directorate, responsible for surveillance operations, the following day. The original group had 30 officers. The unit went through rigorous tests and training without any supplementary payments or rewards, except that every year of service counted as two. In November 1974 the unit was ready. Although its main mission was to fight terrorists in Russia - Moscow was to host the Olympic Games in 1980 - Alfa was also used as undercover guards and escorts, first in Lebanon in 1976 and later

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in Cuba, New York and Switzerland before it was sent to Afghanistan to go through its ultimate fire test in December 1979, taking over the presidential palace.<sup>14</sup>

The Moscow Olympic games were approaching and the influential Minister of Internal Affairs (MVD) Nikolay Shchelokov wanted his ministry to have its own special forces in the preparation for the games. On 29 December 1977 the Soviet MVD set up its own special purpose training company. The unit known originally the Special Reconnaissance Unit was subsequently renamed "Vityaz" – the Knight. Vityaz took most of its fighters from the 9<sup>th</sup> company of the 3<sup>rd</sup> battalion of the MVD Dzerzhinskiy division, which collected the top sportsmen of the ministry. Its relations with the KGB were occasionally bordering on hostile. The MVD was not allowed to touch any threat or crime with foreign links, it had no experience of antiterrorist operations and could not train with the new super-secret KGB group. It turned to the Tula Air Assault Division in general and to its in-depth recee company in particular for combat training.<sup>15</sup>

Throughout the Olympic Games and the existence of the USSR, Vityaz performed its duties discreetly and efficiently, always in the shadow of the KGB's more powerful unit "Alfa". However, even before the Olympic Games, the MVD began to form another special unit, "Kobalt", which was to assist the Afghan police after the planned Soviet invasion.

Until the Soviet involvement in Afghanistan in 1979, all its special forces units had no real combat experience. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan changed it all – almost all special forces units took part in the conflict and the experience had a profound impact on most young officers who are today in charge of special operations at every level in every ministry or service.

The USSR prepared its intrusion of Afghanistan carefully, in absolute secrecy. In mid-December 1979, the KGB began to transfer, in small groups, the officers who were to take part in the attack on the Afghan President's palace.<sup>16</sup> The teams were told where they were going only during the final stopover in Tashkent. Even then they were not told what their task was.<sup>17</sup> On 27 December 1979, after a brief but intensive firefight the Russians killed the Afghan President Amin and took over the capital Kabul. The storming party included several units under the general command of KGB Maj-Gen Yuriy Drozdov. The attack on President Amin was conducted by two teams: "Zenit" staffed with KUOS reservists headed by Col Boyarinov, and "Grom" with 52 fighters, including members of Alfa, MOD's 9<sup>th</sup> Air Assault Company and the members of a Moslem battalion, formed for this operation only.<sup>18</sup>

Moscow quickly understood that the Afghan adventure might take a long time and that that it would need more special purpose formations to support the Army. On 11 June 1980, Yuriy Andropov, the KGB chairman, signed an order to send a group of KUOS graduates, 77 officers, to Afghanistan and the following week the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the USSR Council of Ministers decided to form a special purpose unit Kaskad. By the time Kaskad 1, as it became known later, reached Afghanistan in August 1980, it had grown to 1,600 people including experienced combat officers from Zenit, graduates of the Higher Counterintelligence School and 600 fighters of the MVD special purpose unit "Kobalt".<sup>19</sup> Kaskad was to support the 40<sup>th</sup> Army (aka Limited Contingent of Soviet Forces in Afghanistan). Its main tasks was to set up and train the new Afghan security and law enforcement apparatus.

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The training of Kaskad officers on the advanced courses (KUOS) was quite rigorous. They were expected to be able to:

- march for 15 hours during the day, and 7 hours at night, with 10 minute breaks every four hours
- have a basic knowledge of mountain climbing
- fire any weapon
- prepare for use and throw hand grenades
- drive a car, ride a horse and a bicycle
- repair a vehicle
- climb a tree, quickly and
- whistle loudly [sic].<sup>20</sup>

Kaskad 1 served in Afghanistan for 6 months and was replaced by Kaskad 2, which also served 6 months and was replaced by Kaskad 3 for the following 9 months. Kaskad 4 began its service in Afghanistan on 15 April 1982 and returned to the USSR in April 1983. It was staffed mainly by officers of Vympel of the KGB First Main Directorate. The last KGB special forces unit serving in Afghanistan was named Omega. Most of its members were also Vympel officers. The unit returned to Russia in April 1984.<sup>21</sup>

The disadvantage of having KGB reservist units in Afghanistan was that most of their members were full-time KGB officers needed to do their full time jobs in the USSR. After the attack on President Amin's Palace in 1979, the head of the operation Maj-Gen Drozdov submitted a project to the Chairman of the KGB on the need to set up a "full-time" special forces team for foreign operation. On 19 August 1981 the joint session of the Soviet Council of Ministers and the Politburo accepted the project. The new unit was so secret that at the beginning even senior officers referred to it only as "the formation". Later, the unit was given a number, 35690. Only very few officers referred to it as Vympel; most of them used its official title, The Independent Training Centre of the KGB USSR.<sup>22</sup> It was a part of the "S" Directorate, of the First Main [Intelligence] Directorate, responsible for the KGB illegals operating abroad. At the beginning Vympel recruited only officers. Later it began to co-opt experienced NCOs mainly as instructors. Some of them stayed on the job as combat personnel.<sup>23</sup>

When Vympel/Omega was pulled out of Afghanistan, it returned to the USSR where it trained for foreign missions. Many Vympel officers worked in Cuba, Angola, Mozambique, Nicaragua and Yugoslavia, usually as observers and consultants.<sup>24</sup> In the 1980s the unit's members developed particularly close links with their Vietnamese counterpart "Donong" from whom they learned jungle warfare.<sup>25</sup>

The Army spetsnaz, with mainly purely anti-guerrilla tasks, grew bigger in Afghanistan and stayed until the end of the conflict. At the beginning of the invasion, in 1980, there was one Army special forces company in Afghanistan. In 1986 there were two independent brigades in the 40<sup>th</sup> Army occupying/assisting Afghanistan.<sup>26</sup> The army spetsnaz lost 657 soldiers in Afghanistan – many of them conscripts. Kaskad 1-4 lost 6 and Omega lost one.<sup>27</sup>

## After the USSR

The end of the Afghan war did not leave any of the Soviet special units unemployed. This time the enemies were not clearly defined and in most of the cases were the citizens of the Soviet Union. The growth of nationalism, organised crime and interethnic frictions at the end of the 1980s convinced the Soviet leaders that the MVD's powers had to be boosted by new formations, Special Purpose Police Detachments (otryady militsiy osobogo naznacheniya – OMON). The first such units were set up between 1987-1988 in Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev, Minsk and Novosibirsk. By the summer of 1989 the formation of OMON's machinery was completed. The 36,000 members of this new elite formation were directly subordinated to the First Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs – Commander in Chief of the MVD Internal Troops.

In the turbulence of “perestroika”, turning increasingly into “perestrelka”<sup>28</sup> – OMON's glorified and well equipped riot formations were often referred to as “spetsnaz”. In the meantime, the importance and strength of real special forces units also increased considerably. The company Vityaz was upgraded to a battalion in 1990.<sup>29</sup> KGB Alfa teams were formed in Khabarovsk, Kiev, Minsk, Krasnodar, Sverdlovsk and Alma-Ata.<sup>30</sup>

The KGB special forces teams played a vital role in the failed coup of August 1991 by refusing to obey the coup organisers. The plan to take over the Russian parliament with the Alfa group, supported by Vypel, failed when Alfa disobeyed the order and Vypel, still known only as the KGB Independent Training Centre, or Group “V”, was never given the order to attack.<sup>31</sup> Alfa was instantly “rewarded” for its honourable disobedience by being transferred under the jurisdiction of the President of the USSR (Gorbachev) and in December 1991 became a part of the Main Protection Directorate responsible for the physical protection of Russian President Yeltsin and other leaders. The elite team was not suitable for performing guard duties, although some members served as bodyguards in Afghanistan. They were able to observe from close quarters the disappearance of the country they fought for and Yeltsin's chaotic rule. This must have influenced their decision to disobey his orders when on 4<sup>th</sup> October 1993, they were again told to take the Russian parliament by force. They reluctantly supported Yeltsin only when Gennadiy Sergeyev, a member of the team, was killed by a sniper.<sup>32</sup>

The Russian president punished the group by transferring it in December 1993 to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, which stood by him in October, saving his career and probably his life. The move aimed at controlling the mercurial group but also humiliating it. Out of about 400 Alfa fighters, 150 asked for a transfer to the Main Protection Directorate (glavnoye upravleniye okhrany – GUO), 135 joined the Intelligence Service (SVR) and the Emergencies Ministry (MChS) and 112 retired.<sup>33</sup>

Vypel originally escaped major restructuring. The unit was incorporated into the Interrepublican Security Service then the Federal Security Agency and January 1992 joined the Security Ministry. In July 1993 Vypel was transferred to GUO. In December 1993 Yeltsin transferred the group to the Ministry of Interior. As for the members of the Alfa team, the transfer to the MVD, which most of intelligence and security officers looked down on, was an insult. One third of Vypel personnel resigned and an additional 150 of its staff asked for a transfer to another service.<sup>34</sup> Those who stayed became part of the new anti-terrorist unit of the MVD named Vega.<sup>35</sup> Shunned by the officers with a security background, the new unit began to take recruits from the airborne and police formations.<sup>36</sup> This was not easy, as the



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Presidential Protection Service and the Main Protection Directorate were able to offer better salaries for the newly experienced recruits.

It soon became apparent that neither the MVD nor other ministries and services were able to cope with increasingly active Chechen rebels and several antiterrorist operations showed a need for one centre coordinating the struggle against terrorists and big organised crime groups. The Federal Counterintelligence Service (FSK – federalnaya sluzhba kontrrazvedki), jointly responsible with the MVD for antiterrorist operations between December 1993 and April 1995, had a team of 21 fighters in its new Special Operations Directorate. Eighteen of them took part in the assault on Grozny in January 1995.<sup>37</sup> The FSK was restructured in April 1995 and renamed the Federal Security Service (federalnaya sluzhba bezopasnosti – FSB) and the Special Operations Directorate, possibly considering its future cooperation with the outside world and its unfortunate acronym in English, was finally renamed the Special Purpose Centre. What was left of the Alfa and Vega/Vympel teams joined the centre in 1996.<sup>38</sup>

As the old Russian power ministries and services were getting weaker in the early 1990s, their new and old customers, unable to count on their security and protection bodies, began to set up their own special forces. This was not a difficult task as there was a large pool of unemployed, underemployed or badly paid ex-MOD, KGB or MVD officers and NCOs with serious battle experience from Afghanistan, Soviet hot spots and later Chechnya.

The Emergencies Ministry has its own special forces detachment responsible for protection of its officials in high risk areas.<sup>39</sup> The Russian Customs Service also acquired its own special forces unit.<sup>40</sup> The Main Directorate for Administering Sentences of the MVD – moved later to the Ministry of Justice – set up its own special forces units in 1992.<sup>41</sup> The Ministry of Justice also set up special forces detachments at the end of 1990s. In 1998 the detachments became branches, by order of the Minister of Justice. Its 5,000 staff are divided into 86 branches subordinated to the Ministry's Main Directorate of Administering Sentences of the ministry. Their main task is escorting prisoners and custodial security work on Russian territory, including Chechnya.<sup>42</sup> The Border Guards of the FSB in April 2004 set up a special unit to escort and protect road traffic in the mountains against attacks by Chechen radicals and bandits.<sup>43</sup> Moscow region has its own MVD spetsnaz, “Rus”, formed on 1 August 1994.<sup>44</sup> The MVD had at the end of the century its own secret team dealing with hostage takers in the North Caucasus.<sup>45</sup> In the 1990s the regional MVD directorates formed special purpose teams to combat organised crime. Most of them went on a tour of duty to Chechnya. Some of the cities and smaller regions have been forming the Russian equivalent of SWAT units, called Spetsyalnyye Otryady Bystrovo Razvertyvaniya – SOBR, Rapid Deployment Special Detachments.<sup>46</sup> Their quality and training varies, depending on the funding and local MVD commanders and officials.

The army's engineering troops have their own spetsnaz, responsible for mine clearing in combat conditions in Chechnya.<sup>47</sup> The Russian ground forces recently formed special antiterrorist detachments to protect army units and military installations. The ground forces are also setting up company-sized tactical groups in every military district to support territorial MVD and FSB operations.<sup>48</sup>

The FSB Special Purpose Centre and the units under its command will continue to be the sharpest and most effective weapon in Moscow's war against terrorism, regardless of how many more special forces units will be set up in Russia by other

state bodies. Even with Putin in charge, the biggest headache of the FSB may be how to avoid political interference and manipulation as these are the main reasons for several major mistakes which could otherwise have been avoided.

## **The Mistakes & Remedies**

The FSB special forces, known today and throughout most of their history as Alfa and Vypel, have not made many mistakes. Their less than perfect operations were usually the result of political pressures and interference in operational matters, constant changes at the top, lack of support from their political task masters and under-funding and politically motivated power structure baiting at the end of the last century. In the immediate post-Soviet period the special forces were admired and feared by the new Kremlin masters – their refusal to attack the defenders of the Russian parliament in August 1991 was correctly seen as a double edged blessing which could be repeated to the disadvantage of the new rulers. When in October 1993 Alfa, under a new command, but staffed by “old” professionals, once again refused to attack the parliament, Yeltsin's reaction was to weaken them, yet expecting from them the same loyalty and, more important, the same efficiency when combating organised crime or the Chechen rebels. Other 'failures' include:

- In the operation on Budennovsk in June 1995, against a large group of Chechen terrorists, Alfa was not in overall command of the operation. It had a communications system incompatible with other units taking part in the operation. This situation occurred in several other Chechen operations.<sup>49</sup>
- The still not clearly explained death of Colonel Savelev, one of Alfa's most experienced officers, just before Christmas 1997 was the result of political pressure from the very top when a lone criminal took a Swedish diplomat hostage and kept him in a car in the shadow of the Kremlin walls. Savelev volunteered to replace the hostage but died after his subordinates opened fire, killing the hostage-taker but also wounding Savelev four times. The official explanation, that Savelev died as a result of a heart attack before he was hit by the bullets, begs a question about the medical tests of all Alfa members.
- The first part of the Nord-Ost anti-terrorist operation in October 2002 was a success. The second phase, the post-operational care, was a failure for which the Alfa and Vypel teams were, unfairly, blamed.<sup>50</sup> It should not have been their responsibility to decide who should be given the antidote for the gas used by the medical teams. So far it has not being explained who was responsible.
- The Beslan tragedy in September 2004 was once again a failure at the higher organisational level. The FSB was not exclusively in charge of the operation.<sup>51</sup>

To reduce the probability of future security disasters, President Putin is forcing the qualitative improvement and modernisation of Russia's power organisations – a task made easier by very healthy oil and gas revenues. Russia's main security problem, Chechnya, requires consequential and effective coordination of the efforts of all organisations fighting terror – the Nord-Ost events showed clearly that this process should go far beyond the assault units. This maybe complicated by the fact that the most competent body to fight terrorism is the FSB Special Purpose Centre,

whilst the antiterrorist operations in the Southern Federal District are coordinated by the MVD.

## **Coordinating the Forces in Chechnya**

The Special Purpose Centre (TsSN) is based in Balashikha-2 and consists of Directorate A - still referred to by some as Alfa - with five sections; Directorate V - the former Vypmel - with four sections and the Special Operations Service. One section from each of A and V directorates is permanently based in Chechnya with tours of duty lasting 45 days.<sup>52</sup> There are now 12 regional special purpose departments of the FSB around Russia. Most of them are manned by "Vypmel" units and the rest by "Alfa". They are under the command of local FSB heads, although it is probable that in future the Special Purpose Centre of the FSB will coordinate regional outposts. The Special Purpose Centre cooperates closely with counterparts from Israel, France, Spain, China, South Korea and other countries.<sup>53</sup>

The MVD has also been working on modernising and professionalising of its special forces units. The ministry has now 16 spetsnaz detachments and a training centre, established in the city of Smolensk in 2003. Professionalisation of the MVD special forces is expected to be completed by the end of 2007.<sup>54</sup> The MVD's main challenge is the responsibility for running and coordinating the Operational Control Groups (grupy operativnogo upravleniya - GrOU) set up by Moscow in the Southern Federal District before the events in Beslan. In theory, the MVD officers in charge should be in control of all anti-terrorist units in the region. The forces of the Operational Control Groups are expected to be in their area of operation within 30 minutes from the moment alarms are sounded.<sup>55</sup>

The other problems facing the MVD officers in charge are: the still continuing turf wars among power ministries and services, ensuring the compatibility of the communication equipment of all organisations involved in antiterrorist operations and cooperation with the until now tolerated armed local militia. Disciplined and effective former KGB officer Minister of Internal Affairs Rashid Nurgaliyev, the Commander of the internal troops Colonel General Nikolay Yevgenevich Rogozhkin, an army man transferred to the MVD not so long ago, and the head of the FSB Army General Patrushev should be able to work together without major problems in Moscow. The problems may occur on the ground, when the units which normally do not work or train together will be called to take part in a joint operation. This transition may be particularly difficult for the GRU special purpose units, specialising mainly in mopping up and search and destroy operations, but which are not trained for purely anti-terrorist missions.

The smooth running of joint operations requires frequent joint exercise. The FSB units are by far the most experienced and better trained than their partners from the MVD and the MOD. V A Bochkov, the Chief of Staff of the Alfa group in 1998, claimed that to train a member of a special forces team takes 3-4 years.<sup>56</sup> It seems, however, that the basic training of a newly recruited Alfa operator (usually someone with military experience) takes only about a year.<sup>57</sup> Maj-Gen Yuriy Drozdov, the father of Vypmel and still one of Russia's most experienced commanders of special operations, writes in his memoirs that it took five years to train an officer of Vypmel.<sup>58</sup> The MOD cannot afford to spent so much time and money to train antiterrorist groups. The MVD has been investing money and effort to train its personnel for anti-terrorist operations but their main targets are dangerous criminals and criminal organisations, tasks requiring an altogether different

approach. The rotations in the GRU special teams are more frequent and the chain of command differs from the FSB and the MVD. The murder of a group of Chechen civilians by a GRU spetsnaz team in January 2002 shows a serious lack of professionalism of the unit involved and its chain of command, in addition to human and judicial dimensions.<sup>59</sup>

The terrorists have by now longer combat experience than most of their opponents in the federal forces, they have been well trained, they have often at their disposal modern weapons and communications equipment, they have a simple command structure and their only goal is to kill members of the federal forces.

## **The Future**

Problems in Chechnya, Vladimir Putin's leadership and the high prices of oil and gas should keep the Russian special forces units in a style to which, until recently, they have not been accustomed. They may lose more soldiers, as the burden of combating terrorists has been gradually shifted on to their shoulders, but the losses incurred by them and the civilian population are sustainable, considering Russia's long history of suffering, and when compared with its official annual statistic of murders and road fatalities. As Putin's Chechen opponents offer nothing beyond a demand for a radical, most probably gradually expanding, Islamic state, the war will go on.

Despite severe criticism of the federal forces, by human rights activists and lawmakers and by military experts, they have achieved important victories and killed or imprisoned almost all main Chechen commanders. If as a result of a legal gerrymandering Vladimir Putin stays in power, or is followed by a likeminded politician, the military and security steamroller will keep eliminating Chechen opponents irrespective of collateral damage on both sides.

Terrorist attacks perpetrated by Islamic radicals will bring many countries together in an attempt to forge bilateral anti-terrorist programmes or larger anti-terrorist coalitions. It is debatable whether the fight with bare-knuckled terrorist opponents can be won by the countries attacked volunteering to wear soft boxing gloves made of vaguely defined legal rules and unrealistic human rights requirements. What is certain is that Russia is not one of these and in spite of official lofty diplomatic pronouncements in the international forums, most of the international community is interested in whether the battles with terrorists can be won, and how.

Considering the demands of the leaders of the Chechen resistance, Moscow will keep fighting, using occasionally methods not acceptable to democratic countries, which then for legal reasons may not be able to accept offers of cooperation from Russia. Cooperation is also made more difficult by many Russian officials, who after years of fighting, operating and arguing against "capitalist" countries, expect anti-Russian conspiracy around every corner.

Russia has no choice but to sharpen its main anti-terrorist weapons – special services and special forces – as much as its financial and human resources allow. Moscow's experience of just and unjust battles could be valuable for her anti-terrorist partners. If Russia is continuously criticised by NATO and the EU members for the way it behaves in Chechnya, it will look for other partners in anti-terrorist coalitions. Its policies in Central Asia are increasingly assertive and coherent. The CIS anti-terrorist centre established in June 2000 has not grown

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very much, only because all its members are interested in the development of the much larger and powerful Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.<sup>60</sup> Russia is particularly interested in security cooperation with Asian countries, especially with China and India. The joint military manoeuvres of Russia and China in August 2005 in China included a Russian special forces unit in an operation aimed at destroying a large group of armed terrorists.<sup>61</sup>

If the campaign against the Chechen radicals is successful and results in some of them emigrating and conducting a violent campaign against Russians abroad and in Russia or in third countries, the EU members which are the most probable hosts for such emigrants will find it difficult not to cooperate with the Russian law enforcement and security forces.<sup>62</sup> If no such cooperation is forthcoming Moscow may decide to use 'the Yandarbiyev option'<sup>63</sup> using members of their special forces or individuals trained by them, to eliminate their enemies living abroad.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Viktor Stepanov, *Spetsnaz Rossii*, Olama Press, 2002, p14. Two words in Russian are used to describe special units. The best known outside Russia is "spetsnaz", popularised mainly by the author Viktor Suvorov (Vladimir Rezun). The other term, used nowadays mainly to describe Armed Forces' tactical electronic interception units, is "osnaz". Both terms in Russian mean "special purpose".

<sup>2</sup> Viktor Stepanov, *Spetsnaz Rossii*, p15; *Bratishka*, July–August 2000, p7.

<sup>3</sup> Viktor Stepanov, *Spetsnaz Rossii*, p56. The first test of naval special purpose detachments took place in the Pacific Fleet in 1938. In 1940 a group of 40 specially selected members of the 1<sup>st</sup> Special Naval Infantry Brigade were to undergo special training. The first naval special forces centre was established in 1953 near Sevastopol. The unit had then 72 people. Viktor Stepanov, *Spetsnaz Rossii*, p191; *Bratishka*, August 2005, p23. In 1989, 16 combat divers were included in Gorbachev's security detail when he met George Bush in Malta ( *Spetssluzhby i Voyska Osobogo Naznacheniya*, Literatura, Minsk, 1997, p456, quoting T Belousova, *Morskiye Dyavoly, Sovershenno Sekretno*, No 6, 1995). The fleets seem to select their special forces detachment mainly from naval infantry units. In contrast with the war in Afghanistan, the naval special forces units take part in the antiterrorist operations in Chechnya.

<sup>4</sup> Viktor Stepanov, *Spetsnaz Rossii*, pp20, 145, 148.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p181, 182.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p119; *Bratishka*, May 2005, p17.

<sup>7</sup> Viktor Stepanov, *Spetsnaz Rossii*, p191.

<sup>8</sup> The exception was Romania, which retained a degree of independence within the Warsaw Pact. The other former Warsaw Pact countries, now NATO members, are reluctant to admit, even 15 years after its disintegration that the level of integration of the pact's special forces was very high.

<sup>9</sup> *Bratishka*, May 2005, p16.

<sup>10</sup> Some experts claim that KUOS were set up in 1973, and survived until 1993. (Oleg Khlobustov, *Lubyanka, ot Aleksandra do Putina*, Yauza Eksmo, 2005, p292). The author of an article in the MVD special forces monthly claims that the advanced courses were run from March 1967 to October 1992. *Bratishka*, June 2005, p4.

<sup>11</sup> *Bratishka*, June 2005, p4.

<sup>12</sup> V Yutov, *Kaskad i Omega*, X-History, 2003, p5 and 8; Viktor Stepanov, *Spetsnaz Rossii*, p198.

<sup>13</sup> Oleg Khlobustov, *Lubyanka, ot Aleksandra do Putina*, Yauza Eksmo, 2005, p292.

<sup>14</sup> *Bratishka*, August 2004, p3.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, December 2002, p2.

<sup>16</sup> Yuriy Drozdov, *Vymysl Isklyuchen*, Vympel, 1996, p194.

<sup>17</sup> *Soldat Udachi*, No 3, 2005, p25.

<sup>18</sup> The Moslem battalion was organised in the summer of 1979, from the 15<sup>th</sup> Special Brigade of the Turkestan Military District. It consisted of 538 people and was commanded

by Maj L T Khalbayev on attachment from the "Vystrel" higher officer courses. (*Voyna Razvedchikov*, Viktor Markovskiy & Viktor Milyachenko, Eksprint, 2001, p3.)

<sup>19</sup> V Yutov, *Kaskad i Omega*, 2003, pp7, 8 and 36; *Russkiye Kommandos*, January 2000, p38.

<sup>20</sup> V Yutov, *Kaskad i Omega*, p43.

<sup>21</sup> Viktor Stepanov, *Spetsnaz Rossii*, p211; *Soldat Udachi*, No 3, 2005, p25; V Yutov, *Kaskad i Omega*, p14 and 117.

<sup>22</sup> V Yutov, *Kaskad i Omega*, p163.

<sup>23</sup> *Bratishka*, August 2005, p31.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, p31; *Expert*, August 1998.

<sup>25</sup> *Bratishka*, August 2005, p31.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, May 2005, p17.

<sup>27</sup> Viktor Stepanov, *Spetsnaz Rossii*, p211; *Soldat Udachi*, No 3, 2005, p25.

<sup>28</sup> "Perestrelka" means "shootout" in Russian.

<sup>29</sup> *Bratishka*, December 2002, p2.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, August, 2004, p3.

<sup>31</sup> V Stepanov & Ye Lisov, *Kremlevskiy Zagovor*, Ogonek, 1992, pp105 and 125.

<sup>32</sup> Aleksandr Korzhakov, *Ot Rassveta Do Zakata*. Posleslovye. Detektivpress, 2004, pp221-231; *Spetsnaz*, October 2003, p2.

<sup>33</sup> Some sources give the number of those transferred (Alfa and Vympel) as 700 and the number of people who decided to stay in the MVD as 117. (*Soldat Udachi*, No 6, 2005, p17.)

<sup>34</sup> *Bratishka*, August 2005, p31; *Expert*, August 1998; Oleg Khlobustov, *Lubyanka, ot Aleksandra do Putina*, p359. Former KGB/FSB Maj-Gen Aleksandr Mikhaylov claims that Vympel was transferred to the MVD in September 1991. Aleksandr Mikhaylov, *Chechenskoye Koleso*, Sovershenno Sekretno, 2002, p79. This may be a reference to the Ministry of Security and Internal Affairs, fused briefly by Yeltsin in January 1992 but declared almost immediately as unconstitutional.

<sup>35</sup> According to some experts, Vega was subsequently transferred to the newly formed Federal Security Service, FSB. Oleg Khlobustov, *Lubyanka, ot Aleksandra do Putina*, p359.

<sup>36</sup> *Soldat Udachi*, No 6, 2005, p17.

<sup>37</sup> Aleksandr Mikhaylov, *Chechenskoye Koleso*, p71.

<sup>38</sup> Oleg Khlobustov, *Lubyanka, ot Aleksandra do Putina*, p359.

<sup>39</sup> *Bratishka*, February 2001, p8.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, May 2002, p14.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, June 2002, p20; November 2002, p20.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, January 2002, 10-11.

<sup>43</sup> ORT, 20 April 2004. The missions of the border guard units in the North Caucasus are similar to those of special forces units of other power structures operating in the region.

<sup>44</sup> *Krasnaya Zvezda*, 1 August 2000, p3.

<sup>45</sup> *Izvestiya*, 23 December 1998, pp1&2.

<sup>46</sup> The SOBR units are changing their name to OMSN special purpose police detachments.

<sup>47</sup> *Suvorovskiy Natisk*, 4 December 2003, p4.

<sup>48</sup> The announcement was made by the commander-in-chief of the Ground Troops Col-Gen Aleksey Maslov on 25 August 2005, Interfax-AVN, BBC Monitoring.

<sup>49</sup> Maj-Gen Rt (FSB) Aleksandr Mikhaylov claims that in the mid 1990s the Russian special forces belonging to different masters had five not always compatible communication systems. (*Chechenskoye Koleso*, p137.) See CSRC papers written by CW Blandy at [www.da.mod.uk/csrc](http://www.da.mod.uk/csrc) about the Russian operations in Chechnya.

<sup>50</sup> See Henry Plater-Zyberk, "Beslan – Lessons Learned", Conflict Studies Research Centre, Russian Series, 04/34, November 2004, p14, [www.da.mod.uk/csrc](http://www.da.mod.uk/csrc).

<sup>51</sup> See *ibid*, passim.

<sup>52</sup> *Vremya MN*, 23 January 2001, quoted by Agentura. Ru.

<sup>53</sup> *Bratishka*, April 2005, p3.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, March 2005, p3.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, March 2005, p3.

<sup>56</sup> V A Bochkov, the Chief of Staff of the Alfa group in 1998, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, No 32, 25 February 1998, p7. One of the main tasks of the commanding officer of the Alfa team is the constant modernisation of combat and other elements of antiterrorist training

and recruitment of suitable candidates. Alfa has a special training subunit (*Bratishka*, July 2005, pp2-8). The recruitment process in the GRU spetsnaz is different and the training shorter. There is also a different command structure and more frequent rotation of personnel.

<sup>57</sup> *Bratishka*, July 2005, pp2-8.

<sup>58</sup> Yuriy Drozdov, *Vymysl Isklyuchen*, 1996, p166.

<sup>59</sup> Lenta. ru, 30 August 2005; *Vremya Novostey*, 30 April 2004. Among the “regular” airborne formations there is only regiment capable of combating Chechen sabotage-recce groups. *Bratishka*, May 2005, p18.

<sup>60</sup> The aim of the CIS counter-terrorism centre has been to coordinate CIS security structures to prevent terrorist acts but not to combat terrorists. The HQ is in Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan) and the staff consists of officers from Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The centre also has its own databank. *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 10 June 2002, p9 and 10. In June 2000, the CIS Centre had 60 staff, *Nezavisimoye Vozennoye Obozreniye*, 24 June 2005.

<sup>61</sup> RTR, 20 Saturday August 2005.

<sup>62</sup> DDP Agency, Berlin, 31 March 2004; *Der Spiegel*, 13 September 2004, p20, BBC Monitoring. German media pointed out systemic shortcomings in security procedures in Germany which allowed members of the Chechen community in Dresden to conspire against Russia. Moscow claims also that the presence and activities of Ahmed Zakayev, a Chechen representative of the late president Aslan Maskhadov in London are hostile and wants him for trial in Moscow.

<sup>63</sup> President of Chechnya between April 1996 and February 1997, Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev was killed by a bomb planted under his car in Doha (Qatar) on 13 February 2004. Two Russian nationals were found guilty by the Qatari authorities of planting the bomb.





## **Want to Know More ...?**

See: C W Blandy, "*Chechnya After Beslan*", Conflict Studies Research Centre, Caucasus Series, 04/27, September 2004, [www.da.mod.uk/csrc](http://www.da.mod.uk/csrc)

H Plater-Zyberk, "*Beslan – Lessons Learned*", Conflict Studies Research Centre, Russian Series, 04/34, November 2004, [www.da.mod.uk/csrc](http://www.da.mod.uk/csrc)

Viktor Stepakov, *Spetnaz Rossii*, Olma Press, 2002

Mikhail Boltunov, *Alfa Nye Khotela Ubivat*, Shans, 1995

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