



The Russian State's Use of Irregular Forces and Private Military Groups: From Ivan the Terrible to the Soviet Period

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Introduction

Russia's growing employment of non-linear forms of warfare (including private military contractors) has long historical traditions. This paper seeks to discuss the main milestones of historical evolution of Russia's use of mercenary and irregular forces from Tsarist Russia to the final days of the Soviet Union.

Specifically, this paper will explore:

- Key ideas/motivations that guided the Russian state in employing these groups prior to 1917;
- The evolution of the Soviet approach toward irregular forces and their use within the scope of (para)military operations;
- Participation of Soviet "military advisors" in regional conflicts and zones of instability as part of the geopolitical power play against the West (primarily the United States);
- The phenomenon of "special forces" (*Spetsnaz*) as a means to achieve specific tasks.

The research is built on a broad range of Russian sources and presents a combination of chronological and thematic approaches.

Russia's Use of Irregular Forces in the pre-Soviet Period (1612–1917)

As described in the first paper in this series, “War, Business and Ideology: How Russian Private Military Contractors Pursue Moscow’s Interests,” Russia’s use of private military contractors dates all the way back to the Livonian War (1558–1583) and reflects Russia’s traditional weakness in the realm of naval operations.¹ During the same period, Cossack *ataman* (leader) Yermak Timofeyevich, hired by the powerful Stroganov merchant family, undertook a raid against the Muslim quasi-state of the Khanate of Sibir. Conceived as a means to gain economic profit, this expedition, which lasted from 1581 to 1585, would become a crucial milestone in Russian history. In particular, it resulted in a dramatic enhancement of Russian state boundaries and paved the way for Russia’s ultimate conquest and colonization of all of Siberia and the Far East.

Another significant episode occurred during the Time of Troubles (1598–1613), when initial heavy reliance on Swedish mercenaries during the war against the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth eventually underwent a profound change in strategy. By 1610, the employment of foreign mercenaries would give way to a unique mixture of military contractors and partisan/guerilla fighters (combining ethnic Russians and non-Russian peoples)—the so-called “People’s Militia” (*narodnoye opolcheniye*)²—which ousted Polish forces from Moscow (1612) and gave rise to the Romanov Dynasty (1613).

Subsequently, the process of active inclusion of irregulars in the architecture of the Russian armed forces owed to a combination of two interrelated processes/aspects:

1. Active east- and south-ward expansion of the Russian Empire, which required constant surveillance, control of the territory and protection of the rapidly changing frontier; as well as
2. The necessity to integrate the conquered non-Russian peoples within the architecture of the Russian state with their minimal distraction from traditional activities.³

Thus, at the height of pre-1917 Russia’s power, the backbone of the Imperial irregular forces consisted of the following major groups:

- Cossacks,⁴ who, by 1853, comprised of, among others, the Don, Black Sea, Ural, Caucasian, Astrakhan, Danubic, Orenburg, Azov, Siberian, Baikal, Bashkir-Mesher and Buryat hosts.
- Non-Russian troops (*inorodcheskiye voyska*)—in particular, the Kalmyk Army, the Dagestani and the Tekin Horse Guards Regiment, the Albanian Army (composed of Greeks and the Arnauts), the Valakh Hussar Regiment, and the Kengerlin Mounted Police.

During the First World War (1914–1917),⁵ perhaps, the most “exotic” project pertaining to the use of irregulars that emerged was the idea to create the Euphrates Cossack Army (composed of Armenians, Assyrians and Yezidis living in the Middle East) as a means to confront the Ottoman Empire and distract its forces from the Caucasian Front.⁶

That said, in Imperial Russia the above-mentioned forces primarily performed auxiliary functions, which, in addition to providing border security, included military operations against militarily

weak forces as well as territorial defense in potentially unstable areas.⁷ On top of that, Cossacks were extensively used to confront (in today's parlance) "hybrid threats," including suppressing protest movements as well as rendering physical protection to the Emperor.⁸ Furthermore, so-called *plastun*⁹ Cossacks (part of the Black Sea and then later the Kuban Cossack Host) were employed as prototypical special operations forces (*Spetsnaz*) in major military conflicts fought by the Russian Empire between 1842 and 1917. The *plastuns* operated in small, highly maneuverable groups, capable of penetrating enemy lines with ease.¹⁰

At this point, it is also worth referencing General Alexander Roediger, a member of the Imperial Russian State Council and minister of war of the Russian Empire (1905–1909), who noted that "in some areas of military service, irregular troops are handier than regular forces."¹¹ This idea received new impetus in recent years, following the outbreak of a series of regional conflicts (primarily, the Syrian Civil War and the Ukrainian crisis) and Russia's growing fear of "hybrid threats" posed (in Russian discourse) by the West, in the form of Western support for "colored revolutions."¹²

Pre-1917 Russian history also witnessed one curious episode that might have served as a prototype for the "military advisors" who would later be employed in the Soviet period—the Persian Cossack Brigade. Formed in 1879 (training was conducted by Russian military instructors), reportedly at the request of Nasir-ed-Din Shah, the Brigade "became the most effective military formation within the Persian armed forces" and was extensively utilized (among other tasks) for "suppression of public protests."¹³

The Great Transformation: From Irregulars to *Spetsnaz* (1917–1968)

During the Civil War (1917–1922) the territory of the former Russian Empire became an arena of intense armed conflict, with irregular military operations (frequently replacing conventional war) actively employed by all sides. The ways these forces were used differed considerably¹⁴:

Sub-Type 1: Army-Type Irregular Forces

Although initially showing undisputed advantage (due to their highly qualified military specialists and a high level of unit maneuverability on the battlefield), the army-like structure used exclusively by the White Movement ultimately proved to be counter-productive. Their rigid structure, coupled with ineffective patterns of mobilization, eroded the advantages of this model.

Sub-Type 2: Guerilla-Style Irregular Forces

The so-called "Green Armies"¹⁵ (primarily, the Revolutionary Insurrectionary Army of Ukraine, led by Nestor Makhno), whose operational theater covered huge landmasses, employed tactics utilizing small highly maneuverable groups (5–20 and later 60–70 men), which allowed the Ukrainian forces to conduct rapid raids (up to 100 kilometers per day) in the enemy's rear. The main drawbacks to these types of forces—aside from a lack of coordination—was their rigid territorial attachment, inadequate economic resources, and lack of a unifying ideology.

Sub-Type 3: Irregulars of the New Type

The Red Army, which had to maintain control over a vast area with a front stretching for almost 8,000 km, extensively relied on irregulars that were integrated into the structure of its armed forces. This move allowed the Soviet side to deny the opponent valuable human resources (via mass mobilization) and maintain steady control of the territory, while simultaneously operating behind the enemy's frontlines.

The Soviets' profound strategic success stemmed from their ability to successfully adopt their opponents' inherent advantages, which they complemented with a fervent ideological component (virtually non-existent among the Greens). From an operational perspective, the Reds—unlike the Whites who futilely used irregular forces in frontal attacks (or operations against the enemy's flanks)—relied on irregulars already located in the enemy's rear. Moreover, the role of Soviet authorities, including that of Vladimir Lenin, was essential because they emphasized the necessity to introduce “specialization” among irregular formations. One example was the “bomber school” (*shkola podryvnikov*), which produced individuals specially trained for subversive actions.¹⁶ By merging military and paramilitary functions with strong ideological indoctrination, the Soviet authorities *de facto* started to implement elements of what today is popularly referred to as “hybrid warfare”; these tactics were then extensively tested during the Soviet-Polish war (1919–1921). The vast bulk of subversive operations on the territory of Poland were carried out by the so-called Illegal Military Organization (*Nelegalnaya Voennaia Organizatsiia*), created at the end of 1919 (at the initiative of Iosif Unshhtit), and later comprised of 300 groups/cells.¹⁷ Its actions turned out to be so successful that its operative principles would comprise the backbone of “active measures” (*aktivnyie meropriiatiia*) against the Soviet Union's ideological enemies.¹⁸ During 1919–1925, similar groups were also active in Romania, Bulgaria and even Montenegro, with Soviet “advisors” providing the locals with essential knowledge on subversive/terrorist activities.¹⁹ At this juncture, an important message was voiced (agreed to by Lenin, yet not feasible from an economic perspective) by Leon Trotsky, who, in August 1919, proposed to start sending paramilitary and conventional military groups to India as a means to inflame a Socialist revolution in this country and diminish the British position in the Greater Middle East and Southeast Asia.²⁰

Adoption of Irregulars by the Soviet State

It would not be an understatement to say that these methods created the foundation for the emergence of the Soviet special forces (*Spetsnaz*). Interestingly enough, this merger between “foreign” and “domestic” experience in terms of non-linear military operations would be used in the Soviet Union's western areas (Kyiv, Odesa and Kharkiv became the main training bases) during 1928–1933, as a part of Moscow's general preparation for a much-anticipated war with the West.²¹ At this point, however, the Soviet side made a fateful blunder by dismissing “partisan formations” as unfit for the country's military doctrine, which rejected defensive war and claimed that in case of military conflict “the Soviet Army will be the most offensive army among all existing in the world.”²² This attitude turned out to be a dire mistake with terrible consequences for the Soviet Union. In particular, the outward rejection of non-linear warfare during the interwar period profoundly contributed to Nazi Germany's rapid advance into Soviet territory in World War II, during Operation Barbarossa. Yet, the Soviet authorities again realized the importance and necessity to apply non-linear forms of warfare following the first few months of hostilities with the German army. On August 8, 1941, Lavrentiy Beria (a member of the Soviet State Defense

Committee) sent a letter to Joseph Stalin arguing for greater consolidation of the partisan movement. He also praised the effectiveness of non-linear warfare against regular German troops.

Therefore, despite the pre-war skepticism, the Great Patriotic War (1941–1945) arguably became a critical milestone in the formation of Soviet special operations forces. It is important to note that the experience of the Soviet partisans of the 1920s was used extensively in the Soviet Union's armed struggle against Nazi Germany. During the period of hostilities on Soviet territory (1941–1945), the overall number of partisans reached 1,000,000 people.²³ Leaving aside the debate about the actual effectiveness of these partisan formations (which remains a matter of incessant debate),²⁴ two aspects should be highlighted. First, German counter-partisan operations were largely unsuccessful.²⁵ Second, for the Soviet side, experience in the war proved useful in its post-war military reforms. In 1951, on the basis of the experience of covert and non-linear operations gained by the Red Army during the Great Patriotic War, sabotage and reconnaissance units (*diversionno-razvedovatelnaia gruppа*) emerged as a part of the army's structure.²⁶ By 1964, the overall number of forces of special operations in the Soviet Armed Forces included ten brigades, two battalions and six companies.²⁷

In essence, the Soviet attempt to delegate more powers and integrate nascent *Spetsnaz* into the architecture of the Armed Forces owed to two interdependent processes: the emergence of tactical nuclear weapons (TNW) and their means of delivery as well as the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), in 1949. According to Soviet military thought, special forces were to be tasked with intelligence collection, reconnaissance and, if necessary (prior to the escalation of an armed conflict between the Warsaw Pact and NATO), physical destruction of NATO sites with tactical nuclear weapons.²⁸

The “international debut” of Soviet *Spetsnaz* ensued in 1968. In May, the Soviet group of special operations forces (10 members) carried out an attack (which lasted 25 minutes) on US facilities located in Cambodia (30 km from the Vietnamese border), targeting American Bell AH-1 Cobra attack helicopters. As a result, three helicopters were destroyed and one was taken to Vietnamese territory. The second episode—Operation Danube (a joint invasion of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact countries)—saw Soviet special forces tasked with taking under their control the Prague airport. Otto Skorzeny (a former German SS lieutenant colonel, one of the most well-known Nazi specialists in subversive operations) characterized it as “brilliant.”²⁹

Soviet ‘Tourists’: State-Owned, Proto-(Private) Military Contractors

As a counter-measure against the perceived “American expansionism worldwide,” the Soviet Union extensively relied on economic (credits, loans, large infrastructural project, knowledge transfers) and military-technical support rendered to Third World countries. During the Cold War, Moscow concluded treaties on military cooperation with more than 120 countries, agreeing to the deliveries of weaponry and training, which included the dispatching of Soviet military personnel as “advisors/instructors.” The most conservative estimates of Russian analysts suggest that no fewer than 60,000 Soviet military advisors, including 523 generals and admirals of the Soviet military, served at various times in different “friendly” countries, including Algeria, Angola, Afghanistan, Vietnam, Egypt, Yemen, Cambodia, China, Cuba, North Korea, Laos, Lebanon, Mozambique, Nicaragua, Syria and Ethiopia.³⁰ Moreover, out of 44 military conflicts between

1945 and 1991 involving Soviet military personnel, 22 featured extensive use of partisan and counter-partisan warfare.

In effect, this Soviet approach was first formulated in November 1919 by Lenin, who, in declaring the victory of the Russian revolution, stated that "...now, our Soviet republic should concentrate on raising up the nations of the East, to wage war against international imperialism together."³¹ Experience of the Civil War and the Great Patriotic War had equipped the Soviet regime with the essential theoretical and practical skills to attempt this.

In the post-World War II period, the first Soviet attempt to apply non-linear/hybrid measures to influence external developments occurred in 1947, when Moscow played a decisive role in the training of Kurdish militants. Mustafa Barzani (the leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party), upon obtaining necessary skills in sabotage and diversionary techniques at the Frunze Military Academy, was sent to Iraqi Kurdistan, in 1957, to conduct operations.³²

With the Soviet Union's growing involvement in various international conflicts, Moscow sought legitimacy for its actions by adopting a concept known as the Internationalist Obligation (*Internatsionalnyi Dolg*). This façade to justify Soviet covert presence in regional conflicts was first maintained in the so-called Brezhnev Doctrine (1968), and later became engrained in the country's 1977 constitution.³³ And though spread across a broad operational theater (three continents), these Soviet actions collectively bore certain general patterns:

Pursuit of Legitimacy

In pursuit of legitimacy, virtually every instance of involvement in the affairs of another country was preceded by an "official request" from the target country/leader/government that was allegedly under an "imperialist attack" and incapable of dealing with the peril on its own. And though it was little more than a mirage, this "request" was, nevertheless, ardently used by the Soviet side as a "lighting rod" (for domestic and external purposes) to grant the necessary "legitimacy" to Moscow.³⁴ Incidentally, quite similar arguments (with exactly the same emphasis on "legitimate government") were used more recently by the Russian Federation in its actions against Ukraine (2014) and in Syria (2015).

Fear of International Exposure

Fear of international exposure was (and still is) premised by a desire to portray the United States (and its allies) as aggressors. This was first explicitly voiced by Stalin prior to the outbreak of the Korean War, when he abruptly ordered the withdrawal of all Soviet military advisors from North Korea. Speaking to Nikita Khrushchev, he noted that "...they could be imprisoned. We do not want the facts of our participation in this affair to become public. This is [North Korean leader] Kim Il Sung's business."³⁵ From this point on, Soviet military involvement in other countries took the shape of either a) a proxy war with foreign participation (the Korean War, Angolan Civil War, the Arab-Israeli conflict, the War in Lebanon); b) a proxy war with clandestine employment of Soviet military personnel; or c) a combination thereof.

The threat of international exposure resulted in extremely high levels of secrecy. When sent on a foreign mission, Soviet military “advisors” or irregular forces (notoriously identified by Moscow as “tourists,” if discovered) were not allowed to take any items related to their true identity. In March 1970, the Soviet minister of defense, Marshal Andrey Grechko, reportedly told Soviet pilots: “Comrades, in case you are shot down beyond the Suez Canal and taken hostage, we do not know you; get out by yourself.”³⁶ Moreover, on many occasions, the Soviet specialists (while departing from the port of Nikolayev) were unaware of their final destination. In his later accounts, the head of the Soviet forces in Egypt, Major General Aleksey Smirnov, noted that “the people had some ideas about where they were going, but our special services would squelch any talk on the subject.” Upon arrival in Odesa or Sevastopol, Soviet soldiers and officers were met by groups of military men, put under tight “quarantine,” and prevented from making calls to any relatives until they had gone through a series of “instructive talks.” From that point forward, they were explicitly prohibited from mentioning anything related to their activities abroad.³⁷ The atmosphere of secrecy and opaqueness surrounding Moscow’s clandestine Cold War–era foreign operations persisted well after the collapse of the Soviet Union.³⁸

Standardized Patterns of Para-Military Preparation

The pattern of Moscow’s surreptitious foreign activities exhibited extensive reliance on the Soviet experience of the Great Patriotic War. Specifically, the Soviets tried to impose some common military structures on the armed forces of “partner” countries based on the Soviet army model. Notably, North Korea’s first leader, Kim Il Sung, once stated that “our people’s army was organized on the basis of principles of the Soviet army and with reliance on its rich experience.”³⁹ Exactly the same point was made by Lieutenant General V. Budakov, who served as the head military advisor of the Soviet Union in Syria (1977–1980). Specifically, he underscored the decisive role of the Soviet World War II experience in the formation of the Syrian armed forces.⁴⁰ It is critical to note that, in pursuit of this imposed uniformity, Moscow actively relied on its “military advisors” clandestinely sent to the country in question and tasked with “organiz[ing] and prepar[ing] local armed forces for actions against a specific enemy”—a thesis put forth, in 1980, by the marshal of the Soviet Union and chief of the General Staff, Nikolai Ogarkov.⁴¹ This pattern was used by the Soviet side in all theaters and with limited consideration of local particularities (climate, geography, mentality, local culture). Although initially successful, that generalized approach showed multiple flaws in the long run, owing to at least four main reasons.

First, while pushing post-colonial countries to integrate the Soviet Union’s World War II experience, the Soviet Armed Forces themselves failed to fully adopt these lessons. The age of “nuclear euphoria” in the 1960s led to an impasse in Soviet military thought.⁴² This was reflected in excessive dogmatism and inability to follow new trends in the changing nature of warfare. A hugely negative consequence included a visible lack of attention by the political-military leadership to various “non-standard” fighting techniques.

Second, the “one-size-fits-all approach” disregarded obvious local differences in mentality and determination. For instance, as noted by Nikolay Kolesnik, the chairperson of the Soviet Vietnam War veterans organization, the Vietnamese troops demonstrated an “outstanding level of patriotism, fighting spirit and diligence in learning.”⁴³ At the same time, Arabs generally did not demonstrate the same level of zeal and resolve. The latter tended to either blame the Soviet

weaponry for their defeats or outwardly demanded that “Soviet troops be sent in to fight on their behalf”—an aspect that frequently infuriated the top-level Soviet military command (in particular, Marshal Dmitry Ustinov, the minister of defense of the Soviet Union) and perplexed the political leadership (such as Yuri Andropov).⁴⁴

Third, a growing technological gap emerged, stemming from excessive dogmatism. The lessons of the Arab-Israeli conflict were misconstrued (or not taken seriously) by the mainstream of the Soviet military-political leadership, which (with very rare exceptions) continued to try to convince the Politburo that Soviet military technologies were unparalleled in their qualities. Voices claiming that “our weaponry is inferior to US- and Israeli-produced pieces”⁴⁵ were hushed up. Moreover, the Soviet military-political leadership, while justifying the growing number of failures by blaming the Arab as “unfit for fighting,” missed the key point.⁴⁶ Mainly, the Soviet military advisors, who were taking an increasingly large part in the fighting, “were waging an old-type war, while the adversary [US-backed Israel] was conducting a war of the new type.”⁴⁷ This unpleasant reality (already apparent toward the final phase of the war in Vietnam⁴⁸) was dismissed by Moscow, even though it became fully obvious during the Arab-Israeli wars—including in such Soviet-prioritized areas as Electronic Warfare (EW).⁴⁹

Fourth, the Soviet Union consistently failed to catch up with the changing nature of war/warfare. As noted by Marshal Ogarkov in the early 1980s, “mobility and offensive preventive operations” (in addition to other aspects) would constitute the backbone of future military operations.⁵⁰ Yet, those ideas did not receive practical implementation in the Soviet army. As experience of regional conflicts (especially the war in Afghanistan) explicitly demonstrated, Soviet troops were ill-prepared for:⁵¹

- counter-insurgency operations (in the majority of instances)⁵²;
- information confrontation of the new type (including, the changing nature of strategic deception);
- night-time fighting and ambush;
- reconnaissance in an unfamiliar terrain.

Additionally, the Soviet military was unable to adjust to a growing list of new/atypical tasks increasingly expected of regular armed forces, such control over communications, protection of critical infrastructure, or the supervision of cargo deliveries⁵³—functions increasingly delegated in the West to private military companies (PMC).

Moscow’s covert presence in regional conflicts abroad turned out to be unsuccessful due to the imposition of Soviet military patterns on its client states, reflected in the following categories/trends:

- A push for the creation of Military Districts (with potential to use these as main operative fronts), which were utterly unfit for smaller countries, leading to additional economic expenditures and growing external debts;

- Emphasis on heavy armored equipment, which was totally impractical in jungles and tropical rainforests;
- A request to introduce a General Staff of the Armed Forces—an idea misunderstood by leaders in post-colonial countries, for whom such a structure was associated not with upgrading military effectiveness but a rival institution headed by (frequently lacking loyalty) the armed forces.
- Emphasis on “priority branches” that included: anti-aircraft warfare (PVO); EW and Radio-Electronic Surveillance; pilot training; sabotage-subversive/reconnaissance operations.

It is crucial to note that Soviet technical-military support (as a combination of arms deliveries and expertise) became one of the Kremlin’s main tools to promote its geopolitical ambitions⁵⁴ in far-flung regions.

When it comes to Soviet military advisors/consultants abroad, one case study—Soviet/Russian-military cooperation with Libya (1973–1992)—is of particular interest. Aside from purchasing Soviet weaponry (approximately \$20 billion worth), the Libyan side also paid for the deployment of the Soviet military specialists on its soil (Tripoli transferred to the Soviet Union \$30,000 per month for this purpose). Locally, they were “treated as mercenaries,”⁵⁵ which, in effect, was not that far off from the actual state of affairs: toward the end of the 1980s, Soviet military specialists were extensively employed in all major armed conflicts fought by Libya, including border skirmishes with Chad, Sudan, Egypt, Niger, Tanzania and Tunisia.⁵⁶ After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, many (at this point former) Soviet military advisors opted to stay in Libya and continue their service in this country as private contractors.

Supporting Insurgent Movements—Training Terrorists

Between 1959 and 1971, the outstanding Russian military thinker Evgeny Messner wrote three books that *de facto* predicted the nature of future conflicts. The key thesis emphasized by Messner was reflected in the following postulate: “Wars will not be waged with forces of regular armies... future wars will take the form of a mutiny... partisans, saboteurs, terrorists, propagandists will become the main driving force. Violence (intimidation and terror) and partisans will become the main weapons in this war.”⁵⁷ Many Western and some Russian sources ascribe tactics chosen by Moscow in its support for the nascent radical movement in the Middle East to ideas presented by Messner. This might be partially true; however, these Soviet methods should be primarily attributed to the personality of Lieutenant General Pavel Sudoplatov,⁵⁸ who, almost a decade prior to Messner, argued that in order to successfully compete with the West (primarily the US), the Soviet Union had to render support for national-liberation movements in so-called Western zones of influence. This was to be done via training local terrorists, saboteurs and partisans—forces that could become the Kremlin’s “fifth columns” in case hostilities with the West were to erupt. Such training was to consist of “theoretical” (ideological work) and “practical” (planning of non-linear military operations) elements.⁵⁹ Though largely ignored at the time, this idea would start to be implemented after Stalin’s death in 1953. For instance, the former element was actively developed

through various youth exchange programs: in 1957 (prior to the 6th World Festival of Youth and Students), the KGB pointed out to Khrushchev that this event could be used as a good opportunity for ideological purposes; similarly, Patrice Lumumba University (now, The Peoples' Friendship University of Russia), which opened in 1960 and was coordinated by the KGB, became one of the main centers of Soviet recruitment of radical neophytes from around the world (international terrorists such as Ilich "Carlos the Jackal" Ramírez Sánchez studied there).

The "practical" aspect of training radicals from abroad was coordinated by the Soviet Ministry of Defense (MoD) and apparently the KGB. One of the most well-known examples was a base located on the 21st kilometer of the Simferopol–Alushta highway, in the village of Perevalnoye, where the classified 165th Training Center was located. Coordinated by the MoD, the center existed from 1965 to 1990, and prepared approximately 18,000 foreign fighters. The first group (75 persons) arrived from Guinea-Bissau⁶⁰ in the summer of 1965.⁶¹ Russian sources claim that "students" from the following countries/territories received practical training at the 165th Training Center: Ethiopia, Guinea-Conakry, Madagascar, Cuba, Afghanistan, Mali, Vietnam, Laos, the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK—Cambodia), Nicaragua, Yemen, Lebanon, Libya, Palestine, India, Zambia, Tanzania, Kongo, Benin, Grenada, and São Tomé and Príncipe—the main theaters of "anti-colonial and anti-imperialist efforts."⁶² It is important to note that training was done by Soviet military cadre officers, all of whom had fought in the Second World War, whereas the main areas of military preparation (aside from standard tactics) included rendering general and specific knowledge on bombing/sapper tasks.⁶³ Russian sources have also claimed that, in a single year (1977–1978) another training center located in the village of Privolnoye (Mykolaiv Oblast) hosted 400 Palestinians (from Syria and Lebanon), 200 Angolans, 200 Namibians, 60 militants from South Africa (African National Congress) and 20 militants from South Yemen.⁶⁴

Aside from the above-mentioned cases, it is worth mentioning⁶⁵:

- The Higher Officer Courses "*Vystrel*" (Solnechnogorsk, Moscow Oblast);
- Special schools coordinated by the KGB and military intelligence, or GRU (Balashikha, Moscow Oblast);
- The Totskoye military polygon (Orenburg Oblast);
- Mary (Turkmenistan);
- Frunze (now Bishkek).

It is also important to emphasize that the Soviet side actively employed proxies: for instance, Soviet support for the Palestine Liberation Organization (initially agreed upon by Moscow in 1970) would be maintained via the German Democratic Republic (GDR) after a meeting that commenced between Erik Honecker and Yasir Arafat in East Berlin. Those talks subsequently led to the German side providing the Palestinians with weaponry and military instructors. Some of the contacts were also maintained via the Soviet diplomatic representation in Tunisia.⁶⁶

Frequently referred to as “freedom fighters” and “insurgents” by Soviet propaganda, “alumni” of these Soviet training centers were, in effect, taught tactics widely employed by various terrorist organizations. Starting from the 1972 Summer Olympics (the Munich Massacre), a spree of terrorism, in many ways implicitly boosted by Soviet efforts, paralyzed the Western world. Yet, although the Soviet Union built up this experience of training foreign militants to wage non-linear warfare, the Soviet Armed Forces Moscow appeared entirely unprepared when faced with the same tactics against them in Afghanistan. In the 1980s, the Soviets started experimenting with anti-insurgency forces (primarily, the *Kaskad* group, under the umbrella of the KGB, which would become the most well-prepared unit for anti-insurgency operations in Afghanistan). Aside from specific preparation techniques, these units were taught local languages and traditions.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, those measures proved largely insufficient.

Conclusion

From 1558 to 1990, the Russian/Soviet use of irregular forces and military contractors underwent a number of profound transformations. But it was the combination of experiences gained in the first half of the 20th century, during the Civil and the Great Patriotic War, that gave rise to a qualitatively new, multilayered phenomenon combining:

- Asymmetry and promptness in actions (a thesis promulgated by Lenin), which resulted in the emergence of forces of special operations such as Vypel and Alpha Group—a tradition that continued under post-1991 Russia;
- Military-political confrontation with the West, by igniting and supporting “national-liberation” revolutionary forces abroad;
- Geopolitical confrontation with the West and proliferation of Soviet geopolitical interests abroad.

The aftermath of the Six-Day War (1967) added a new wrinkle to the Soviet strategy: the previously practiced transfer of partisan methods of war was mixed with a state-sponsored anti-Jewish component (with the decisive role of the KGB)⁶⁸—a combination that would be extensively employed in the Middle East, resulting in a growing wave of terrorism and breakdown of regional security.

Nevertheless, the Soviet Union found itself poorly prepared for counter-insurgency operations and non-linear methods of war used against it by militants in Afghanistan. And simultaneously, the Soviets (to their great and barely concealable astonishment⁶⁹) found themselves confronting non-linear war in the Middle East. Moscow’s forces suffered a heavy blow in Syria, where, starting from the summer of 1981, radical Islamists—merging elements of Soviet partisan tactics and suicide bombings—launched a series of attacks against Soviet military personnel in major Syrian cities. As a result of one such operation (October 5, 1981), Colonel General Grigori Yashkin, the head of the Soviet Military Advisors in Syria, was seriously wounded, while five advisors were killed on the spot and close to 300 were wounded.⁷⁰

Those historical deficiencies apparently have not discouraged the contemporary generation of Russian military thinkers. On the contrary, as Russia's chief of the General Staff, Valery Gerasimov, stated in 2013, future conflicts would be characterized by elements such as a no-fly zone and naval blockades. This template, he noted, was tested in Libya, in 2011. And in preparing for such eventualities, "extensive employment of Private Military Companies in conjunction with armed groups of local opposition forces" would have to become commonplace. According to Gerasimov, when "reflecting about new forms of warfare, Russia must remember its own experience," including "...the employment of partisan units during the Great Patriotic War, [and] confrontation with irregular forces in Afghanistan and the North Caucasus."⁷¹

Thus, toward the end of 2013 (in the wake of the Ukrainian crisis), the Russian side had largely re-considered the importance of non-linear forms of warfare. This was primarily influenced by the nature of regional conflicts in the Middle East (although the general discussion on this had started much earlier). Importantly, the Russian side was planning to rely not only on experience of Western PMCs, but also on its own (vast and frequently successful) achievements in the realm of non-linear confrontation.

Notes

¹ For more information, see Sergey Sukhankin, "War, Business and Ideology: How Russian Private Military Contractors Pursue Moscow's Interests," The Jamestown Foundation, March 20, 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/war-business-and-ideology-how-russian-private-military-contractors-pursue-moscows-interests/>.

² Ivan Zabelin, *Minin i Pozharskiy: Pryamyie i krivyye v smutnoe vremya* (Moscow: Agraf, 1999).

³ The non-Russian people remained a source of perpetual instability and danger, frequently becoming a key factor in various popular uprisings on the outskirts of the Russian Empire throughout the 18th century, and the 19th century, especially after the outbreak of the First Caucasian War (1817–1864).

⁴ Cossacks are militarized and initially ethnically non-Russian people, first mentioned in official correspondence between Russian Grand Duke Ivan the Terrible and the Nogay Count Yussuf, in the year 1550. Throughout Russian history, until 1917, this group was actively employed by the Russian Imperial government for mainly paramilitary services.

⁵ Russia *de facto* pulled out of the war in 1917.

⁶ Ilya Polonskiy, "Samye neobychnyye i ekzoticheskiye voyska Rossiyskoy imperii," *Voyennoye obozreniye*, August 23, 2018, <https://topwar.ru/145903-samye-neobychnyye-i-ekzoticheskiye-voyska-rossijskoj-imperii.html>.

⁷ Vitaliy Maryutkin, "Bashkiro-meshcheryakskoe voysko na sluzhbe Rossii," *Nezavisimoye Voyennoye obozreniye*, October 27, 2017, http://nvo.ng.ru/history/2017-10-27/14_971_bashkir.html.

⁸ It is important to mention that this function was vested on so-called non-Russian people. Aside from Terek and Kuban Cossacks, Cherkes, Nogais, Stavropol Turkmens, Tatars, Georgians and Crimea Tatars were actively employed. For more information, see: Nikolay Plotnikov, "Sobstvennyy Ego Velichestva konvoy," *Voyenno-istoricheskiy zhurnal*, №5 (1991), <http://gosudarstvo.voskres.ru/army/convoy.htm>.

⁹ The term *plastun* derives from the Russian (and Ukrainian) word “*plast*,” which means “sheet,” via the expression “to lay like a sheet” or, in other words, to “lay low.”

¹⁰ “Plastuny: kazachiy spetsnaz,” *Russkaya semerka*, September 25, 2016, <https://russian7.ru/post/plastuny/>.

¹¹ “Irregulyarnye voyska v Rossiyskoy imperii,” *Mvd.prav-ussr.su*, Accessed on February 2, 2019, <http://mvd.prav-ussr.su/иррегулярные-войска-в-российской-имп/>.

¹² Sergey Sukhankin, “Russia to Use Irregular Forces Against ‘Hybrid Threats’: The Case of Kaliningrad,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Volume: 15 Issue: 110 (July 24, 2018), <https://jamestown.org/program/russia-to-use-irregular-forces-against-hybrid-threats-the-case-of-kaliningrad/>.

¹³ Igor Zakharin, “Na sluzhbe u persidskogo shakha,” *Chasovoy*, № 629 (1981): 14–16.

¹⁴ Anatoly Taras, *Malaya voyna. Organizatsyaya I taktika boevykh deystviy malykh podrazdeleniy* (1998). Available at: <https://litresp.ru/chitat/ru/T/taras-anatolij-efimovich/malaya-vojna-organizaciya-i-taktika-boevih-dejstvij-malih-podrazdelenij>.

¹⁵ These semi-organized armed peasant groups fought against all government forces during the Civil War.

¹⁶ “O voyennoy deyatelnosti V.I.Lenina v period inostrannoy voyennoy interventsii,” in *Lenin vel nas k pobede* (Moscow: Gospolitizdat, 1962). Available at: <https://leninism.su/memory/4127-lenin-vel-nas-k-pobede49.html?start=3>.

¹⁷ Iosif Unshlikht, “Sozdatel spetsnaza,” *Zen.yandex.ru*, November 13, 2018, <https://zen.yandex.ru/media/nashi/iosif-unshliht-sozdatel-specnaza-5beac2f4684fe000b389d998>.

¹⁸ Alexander Kolpakidi, D.P. Prokhorov, *Imperiya GRU*, Book 2 (Olma-Press, 2000), <https://www.e-reading.club/book.php?book=28594>.

¹⁹ “Partizanskoe dvizhenie v Zapadnoy Belorussii (Polsha) 1921-1925. Sovetskaya ‘aktivnaya razvedka’,” *Hronos*, accessed February 10, 2019, <http://www.hrono.ru/sobyit/1900war/1921pol.php>.

²⁰ *Arkhiv Trotskogo. Kommunisticheskaya oppozitsiya v SSSR. 1923-1927*, ed. Y. Felshinskiy, T 1 (Moscow: Terra, 1990).

²¹ Kolpakidi, *Imperiya GRU*.

²² Yuri Veremeev, “Krasnaya Armiya I Vtoraya Mirovaya voyna. Uchilas li Krasnaya Armiya oboronyatsya,” in *Anatomiya armii*, accessed February 1, 2019, <http://army.armor.kiev.ua/hist/obor-ne%20umel.shtml>.

²³ Partizanskoje dvizhenije w Velikoii Otechestvennoii vojne // *Sovietskaya vojennaja entsiklopedija*. T. 6. Glav. red. N.V. Ogarkov. Moskva, Voejenizdat, 1978, pp. 230–234.

²⁴ Vladimir Kvachkov. *Spetsnaz Rossii*. Moskva, Russkaja panorama, 2006.

²⁵ Ivan Kovtun. “Okhotniki”: spetspodrazdelenija vermakhta po borbe s partizanami, http://www.bratishka.ru/archiv/2009/2/2009_2_12.php.

²⁶ It is worth mentioning that the idea of creating “units of special operations” was put forth in the early 1950s by Georgy Zhukov. For more information see: “Den podrazdeleniy spetsialnogo naznacheniya (Den spetsnaza) v Rossii,” *Ria.ru*, October 24, 2016, <https://ria.ru/20161024/1479707398.html>.

²⁷ Igor Vetrov, “Istoki: spetsnaz GRU: istoriya s prodolzheniem,” *Bratishka*, October 2008, http://www.bratishka.ru/archiv/2008/10/2008_10_5.php.

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- ²⁸ Taras Repin, “Chem GRU otlichalos ot KGB SSSR,” *Russkaya semerka*, October 16, 2018, <https://russian7.ru/post/chem-gru-otlichalos-ot-kgb-sssr/>.
- ²⁹ Dmitry Yurov, “Shest zarubezhnykh operatsiy spetsnaza GRU,” *TV Zvezda*, December 20, 2014, <https://tvzvezda.ru/news/forces/content/201412200924-z0al.htm>.
- ³⁰ Apparently, the figure was much higher. But due to an extremely high level of secrecy, ascertaining the correct number may be impossible. For instance, Russian sources claim that in Egypt alone, between 1967 and 1973, the numbers of Russian military personnel rotated into and out of the conflict reached 30,000–50,000. Igor Eliseev, Aleksey Tikhonov, “V teni piramid,” *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, №5300 (221), September 30, 2010, <https://rg.ru/2010/09/30/taina.html>.
- ³¹ Vladimir Lenin, *Polnoe sobranie sochineniy*, T 39, (Moscow: Izdatelstvo politicheskoy literatury, 1967–1981), 329.
- ³² Pavel Sudoplatov, *Spetsoperatsii. Lubyanka I Kreml 1930—1950 gody*, (Moscow: Olma-Press, 1997).
- ³³ *Konstitutsiya (Osnovnoy zakon) Soyuzha Sovetskikh Sotsialisticheskikh Respublik*, Chapter 4 (Foreign Policy), Article 30, October 7, 1977, <http://www.hist.msu.ru/ER/Etext/cnst1977.htm#i>.
- ³⁴ Viacheslav Gusarov, “Strategiya ‘taynykh voyn’ Rossii,” *Informatsyonnoe soprotivlenie*, September 5, 2016, <http://sprotyv.info/ru/news/kyev/strategiya-taynyh-voyn-rossii>.
- ³⁵ Nikita Khrushchev, *Vremya, lyudi, vlast*, T. 2, (Moscow, 1999).
- ³⁶ Sergey Kolomnin, “Soldaty chetyrekh kontinentov I trekh okeanov,” *Nezavisimoe voyennoe obozrenie*, February 24, 2012, http://nvo.ng.ru/wars/2012-02-24/1_international.html.
- ³⁷ “Pozor Rossii,” *Snob*, February, 2018, <https://snob.ru/profile/31374/print/134437>.
- ³⁸ For instance, while working on his memoirs, Colonel Vladimir Voronov, the former commander of the Soviet contingent in Vietnam, sent a request to the Central Archive of the Ministry of Defense of the USSR to clarify some details but was rebuked. This demonstrated an extremely high level of secrecy that persisted well after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. For more information see: Igor Morozov, “Kak my voyevali vo Vyetname,” *Moskovskoe obyedinenie organizatsiy veteranov voyny v Afganistane Pereval*, *Rossiyskaya nezavisimaya gazeta veteranov voyny v Avganistane*, (Moscow: Moskovskoe gorodskoe voyenno-patrioticheskoe obyedinenie, October 1991).
- ³⁹ *Vooryzhennaya borba narodov Azii za svobodu I nezavisimost: 1945-1980*, (Moscow: Nauka, 1984), 131.
- ⁴⁰ V. Budakov, “Zashchita zavoyevaniy natsionalno-osvoboditelnoy revolyutsii – vazhneyshaya funktsiya molodogo razvivayushchegosya gosudarstva,” *Voyenno-istoricheskiy zhurnal: Pechatnyy organ Ministerstva oborony SSSR*, No 11 (Moscow: Krasnaya Zvezda, 1980).
- ⁴¹ Grigory Yashkin, “My voevali v Sirii,” *Vestnik PVO*, № 4, (1988).
- ⁴² “Boy XXI veka,” *Akademiya Voyennykh Nauk Rossiyskoy Federatsii*, accessed February 4, 2019, <http://www.avnrf.ru/index.php/publikatsii-otdelenij-avn/nauchnykh-otdelenij/voennogo-iskusstva/228-boj-xxi-veka>.
- ⁴³ Nikolay Kolesnik, “My zashchishchali Khanoy,” *Almanakh “Iskusstvo voyny*,” March 23, 2012, <http://navoine.info/we-were-defending-hanoi.html>.
- ⁴⁴ Leonid Mlechin, “Pogib, zashchishchaya Siriyu,” *Novaya Gazeta*, September 18, 2015, <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2015/09/18/65656-171-pogib-zaschischaya-siriyu-187-8212>.

⁴⁵ Grigory Yashkin, “Pod zharkim solntsem Sirii,” *Voyenno-istoricheskii zhurnal*, № 4, (1998), <https://colonelcassad.livejournal.com/4393476.html>.

⁴⁶ For example, this was clearly demonstrated during the so-called “Bekaa calamity” (in reference to Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley), on June 9–10, 1982, when the Soviet weaponry (and fighting tactics) proved significantly inferior to the Israeli side’s. The subsequent shock in Moscow was profoundly amplified by the fact that the Soviet military advisors were taking part in the operation right alongside the Syrians, thus entirely undermining the rhetoric about former failures being caused by “Arab military inferiority.” For more information see: Vladimir Voronov, “Siriyskiy rok,” *Radio Liberty*, October 4, 2016, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/28029586.html>.

⁴⁷ Alexander Kramchikhin, “Voyennoe stroitelstvo v Rossii, *Znamya*, №12, (2005).

⁴⁸ Anatoly Kulikov, “Poluchennyj v lokalnykh voynakh opyt boevogo primeneniya voysk PVO ostaetsya maloizvestnym I prakticheski ne ispolzuetsya v boevoy podgotovke chastey I soedineniy,” *Army.lv*, accessed January 29, 2019 <http://army.lv/ru/Poluchennyj-v-lokalnih-voynah-opit-boevogo-primeneniya-voysk-PVO-ostaetsya-maloizvestnim-i-prakticheski-ne-ispolzuetsya-v-boevoy-podgotovke-chastey-i-soedineniy/2424/4239>.

⁴⁹ Grigory Yashkin, “My voevali v Sirii,” *Vestnik PVO*, № 4, (1988) http://sr.fondedin.ru/new/fullnews_arch_to.php?subaction=showfull&id=1446377182&archive=1449042076&start_from=&ucat=14&.

⁵⁰ Andrey Orlov, “Perspektivy razvitiya taktiki I operativnogo isskustva form I sposobov vooruzhennoy borby po opyту minuvshykh voyn,” *Tsentr strategicheskikh otsenok I prognozov*, November 8, 2016 <http://csef.ru/ru/oborona-i-bezopasnost/348/perspektivy-razvitiya-taktiki-i-operativnogo-iskusstva-form-i-sposobov-vooruzhennoj-borby-po-opyту-minuvshih-vojn-7222>.

⁵¹ Mikhail Khodarenok, “Afganskaya kompaniya SSSR: nevestrebovannyi opyt,” *Armeyskiy vestnik*, March 14, 2014 <https://army-news.ru/2014/03/afganskaya-kampaniya-sssr-nevestrebovannyj-opyt/>.

⁵² The exception was the military intelligence (GRU) *Spetsnaz*; although their actions also did not always yield positive results.

⁵³ Khodarenok, “Afganskaya kompaniya SSSR: nevestrebovannyi opyt,” March 14, 2014.

⁵⁴ Or, as some experts have also argued, “geo-strategic interests”: for example, see Sergey Lavrenkov, Igor Popov, *Sovietskii Soyuz w lokalnykh voynakh i konfliktakh*, (Astrel: Moskva, 2003); Aleksandr Okorokov, *Tayniye voyny SSSR*, (Sovietskije voenspetsi w lokalnykh konfliktakh XX veka: Moskva, Vesch, 2012).

⁵⁵ Vladimir Voronov, Aleksandr Artemjev, “Sovietskaja shkola Kaddafi,” *Gazeta.ru*, March 31, 2011, <https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/theme/2011/03/31/3571009.shtml>.

⁵⁶ Larisa Kucherova. W nebe and Liviej // Ministerstvo oborony Respubliki Belarus. Armija: Zhurnal Vooruzennykh sil Respubliki Belarus. Minsk, 2011, № 4 (92), pp. 20—27; Voronov, Artejev.

⁵⁷ Aleksandr Savinkin, Igor Domnin, “Voyennaya klassika- nash zolotoy zapas,” *Voyenno-promyshlennyj kuryer*, April 28, 2010, <https://vpk-news.ru/articles/6872>.

⁵⁸ During the Great Patriotic War, Lieutenant General Sudoplatov was in charge of the NKVD’s Administration for Special Tasks, *de facto* heading coordination between partisan and saboteur-reconnaissance units in the enemy’s rear.

⁵⁹ Viktor Baranets, “Neobyavennaya voyna,” *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, April 7, 2013, <https://www.kp.ru/daily/26006.5/2935170/>.

⁶⁰ It is important to note that Guinea-Bissau, known among Russian/Soviet military thinkers as “small Vietnam,” is considered to be one of the most successful examples of partisan warfare in Africa. For more information, see: “Portugalskiy Vyetnam, Kak s pomoshchyu SSSR Gvineya-Bisau dobilas nezavisimosti,” *Voyennoe obozrenie*,

April 29, 2016, <https://topwar.ru/94688-portugalskiy-vetnam-kak-s-pomoschyu-sssr-gvineya-bisau-dobilas-nezavisimosti.html>.

⁶¹ Elena Ovcharenko, Maksim Chizhykov, “Arabskikh terroristov gotovili v Krymu,” *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, September 28, 2001, <https://www.kp.ru/daily/22643/12438/>.

⁶² Baranets, “Neobyavlenaya voyna,” April 7, 2013.

⁶³ “Evgeniy Loginov. SVOU. Perevalnoe v SSSR i segodnya,” *Soyuz veteranov VIIYA*, July 26, 2012, <https://vkimo.com/blog/%D0%B5%D0%B2%D0%B3%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%B9-%D0%BB%D0%BE%D0%B3%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%B2-%D1%81%D0%B2%D0%BE%D1%83-%D0%BF%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%B2%D0%B0%D0%BB%D1%8C%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%B5-%D0%B2-%D1%81%D1%81/>.

⁶⁴ Dmitry Zubarev, “Kursanty dlya borby za sotsializm vo vsem mire,” *Index*, No19 (2003), <http://index.org.ru/journal/19/zubar19.html>.

⁶⁵ Aleksandr Shulman, “Kak Izrail unichtozhyl PVO I aviatsiyu Sirii, a takzhe sotni sovetskikh instruktorov,” *Argument*, July 4, 2015, <http://argumentua.com/stati/kak-izrail-unichtozhil-pvo-i-aviatsiyu-sirii-takzhe-sotni-sovetskikh-instruktorov>.

⁶⁶ Stanislav Lekarev, Aleksandr Viktorov, ““Russkiy sled’ v Palestine,” *Nezavisimoe voyennoe obozrenie*, June 21, 2002, http://nvo.ng.ru/spforces/2002-06-21/7_palestina.html.

⁶⁷ Sergey Kozlov, “Professionally: Ravnykh emu ne bylo,” *Bratishka*, August 2011, http://www.bratishka.ru/archiv/2011/8/2011_8_1.php.

⁶⁸ Sergey Sukhankin, “Anti-Semitism in the late Soviet Union: The rise and fall of Pamyat movement,” *Tiempo Devorado, the Autonomous University of Barcelona*, Vol. 4, No 1 (2017), <https://revistes.uab.cat/tdevorado/article/view/v4-n1-sukhankin>.

⁶⁹ Andrey Pochtarev, “Na Livanskom napravlenii,” *Krasnaya Zvezda*, February 28, 2002.

⁷⁰ Grigory Yashkin, “My voyevali v Sirii,” *Vestnik PVO*, No 4 (Moscow: Krasnaya Zvezda, 1988).

⁷¹ Valeriy Gerasimov, “Tsennost nauki v predvidenii,” *Voенно-Promyshlennyy Kurier*, February 26, 2013, <https://vpk-news.ru/articles/14632>.