



INSIGHTS

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SOF Should Not Be Used as Assault Troops: Lessons from the Russo-Ukraine Conflict



Ukrainian soldiers being trained to clear trenches.
(Photo by U.S. Army Europe via [Flickr](#))

Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, and its subsequent transition into a large-scale conflict, has shown that conventional warfare maintains its relevance in a world of strategic competition. At the same time, however, it has also underscored the inherently hybrid nature of modern warfare, with blurred boundaries between conventional and irregular elements. For Russia and Ukraine, this means that the conflict is occurring at all levels, tactical to strategic, and in multiple domains simultaneously: the front lines, rear areas, areas of occupation, the cyber domain, the information environment, and beyond. In planning for national and territorial defense, countries must account for this element, or risk mismatching resources in ways that degrade their warfighting capability. In this complex threat environment, Special Operations Forces (SOF) have proven invaluable.

SOF, through their inherently versatile nature, are well-positioned to thrive in environments combining

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IWC MISSION: The IWC serves as the central mechanism for developing the Department of Defense's (DOD) irregular warfare knowledge and advancing the Department's understanding of irregular warfare concepts and doctrine in collaboration with key allies and partners.

traditional warfighting, asymmetric tools, and irregular campaigning such as those present in modern wars. In a conventional war scenario, SOF are often used in high-risk, high reward cases that can have lasting strategic and operational impact. They are also trained to be adaptable and to fill a [wide variety of roles](#) including direct action, special reconnaissance, tactical raids, ambushes, subversion operations, ad hoc networks, and support for resistance movements, among others. Yet, despite the versatility and unique value that SOF can bring, both the Russian and Ukrainian militaries have at times throughout the conflict tactically employed these units as light infantry, [filling the role of shock or assault troops](#). For example, SOF have been assigned [to clear out trenches](#), a mission that might yield important short-term tactical gains, but lacks the long-term strategic and operational impact to justify risking these unique assets. This misuse of SOF in conventional infantry roles goes against their specialized purpose and has resulted in [severe casualty rates for them on both sides](#). Given the significant amount of time and investment required to develop SOF operators, these are losses that can take years to replace.

First, this article will briefly examine some of the issues that have led to the misuse of SOF and their roots in Soviet Spetsnaz culture (an origin both Ukrainian and Russian SOF share). Second, it analyzes how the use of SOF in conventional warfighting roles has been critiqued in the Russian blogosphere, which provides interesting insights into how this issue is perceived domestically. Third, it analyzes Ukraine's use of SOF and how SOF, and its misuse, have become an integral part of propaganda messaging on both sides of the conflict in Ukraine. Finally, in the conclusion, it offers some brief considerations for SOF development moving forward.

SOF MISAPPLICATION: A SOVIET ORIGIN

The idea of SOF as an independent entity is a relatively new concept in both Russia and Ukraine, with the Kremlin only forming its [Special Operations Forces Command \(KSSO\)](#) in 2013. Ukraine, reacting to the events of Russia's invasion of Donbass and Crimea in 2014, in turn created their own [Ukrainian Special Operations Command \(UKRSOCOM\)](#) in 2015-2016, elevating SOF to an independent branch of the military. While the creation of these commands should have revolutionized how these countries approach special operations, and by extension, irregular warfare, their independence has been impeded for reasons that will be discussed further below.

Prior to these changes, Spetsnaz units had typically been employed in a decentralized fashion, being spread across the armed forces, intelligence services, and civilian agencies. This tradition stems, in large part, from the legacy of the Spetsnaz of the Soviet Union, which never possessed a central special operations command. The [meaning of the phrase Spetsnaz](#) (*Spetsial'noe Naznacheniya*) is "Special Purpose," or "Special Designation." During the Cold War, these SOF units were divided by role, which in turn informed where they were assigned. In the case of military Spetsnaz, the focus was primarily on special reconnaissance and direct action. In the case of units embedded in the intelligence services, it was ["active measures"](#) in foreign countries, such as influence operations, support to insurgencies, and information warfare. For those assigned to the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD), the primary missions were counterinsurgency and the protection of strategic facilities. While this decentralized distribution may seem advantageous in peacetime, as it allows SOF units to develop specialized expertise, special operations conducted during an active war require precise coordination, which is best achieved through a centralized command and control element. It is precisely for this reason that the [2016 U.S. Special Operations Forces Operating Concept](#) states that, "[w]ithin campaigns, all SOF will be placed under a single special operations commander ...[this] will optimize utilization and effectiveness of SOF enablers across formations and priorities, increase coordination, and ensure

complementary effects within SOF.” Thus, following the Russian invasion of Crimea and Eastern Donbas in 2014, Ukraine began [major efforts to revamp their SOF institutions](#) to conform with this Western model, with the [active participation of](#) U.S. Special Operations Command Europe (SOCEUR), Lithuanian SOF, Polish SOF, and other NATO partners.

The creation of Russia’s KSSO, itself [modeled after the SOF of the West](#), and Ukraine’s UKRSOCOM, created with direct Western SOF assistance, were measures taken to improve coordination between SOF and conventional forces during joint activities. A prime example was the [“Rapid Trident Exercises” throughout 2019-2022](#), which brought together conventional and SOF troops from Ukraine, the U.S., and other NATO allies and partners in order to increase readiness improve interoperability. While these measures should have, on paper, helped define SOF’s role as an equal partner in joint operations, in practice, SOF commanders have acted primarily as force providers. Instead of commanding these units themselves, they assign them to conventional commanders. Due to lack of clear doctrine explaining the application of SOF in mutual support of conventional forces and insufficient combined arms exercises to put these concepts into practice, these conventional commanders often treat SOF units much as they would any other unit, instead of treating them as highly specialized ones. While it is true that special operators may be [capable, and even highly effective](#), in conventional roles such as leading frontal assaults, such high-risk applications do not take advantage of these units’ unique value and skillset, nor do they bring the strategic or operational value that SOF are meant for.

Furthermore, the losses these units have suffered make the use of SOF for such purposes a great sacrifice of long-term strategic advantages for limited short-term gains. This tendency is not new, but rather, another example of how Soviet-era practices plague the current Russian and Ukrainian militaries. This has also not escaped the notice of Russian commentators. According to one Russian military blogger in a [post from April 2022](#), “using units, which have special training and require long-term and costly investment, as infantry is possible, but it must only be done in exceptional cases...We were confronted with this phenomena back in [the Afghan-Soviet War] in the 108 Motorized Rifle Division. There, the special reconnaissance battalion of the division was quite often used as assault troops.”

Of course, this is by no means the fault of individual commanders, but rather occurs due to a general lack of awareness of, and doctrine on, the importance of irregular warfare (IW) in modern wars and how crucial it is for SOF to focus on the operational and strategic missions they are trained for, rather than the tactical ones that appear to yield the most immediate results. In addition, the use of SOF is hampered by challenges in coordinating with other branches of the military. In Ukraine, for example, the various services [have all maintained their own separate training centers](#) and rarely perform joint training. As a result, conventional force commanders struggle to understand how SOF fits into strategic planning and the value they can bring to their own operations.

INTERNAL CRITICISM OF THE RUSSIAN MILITARY’S USE OF SOF

While specific details on how Russia has employed their SOF during the conflict are naturally limited due to their clandestine nature, Russian analysts and military bloggers have been quite active in discussing these topics through both formal and informal channels. Considering the tight hold the Kremlin retains over its domestic media, it is perhaps surprising that these analysts and commentators have not been shy in their criticism of the Russian military’s use of SOF for roles they were not intended for. This is part of a general trend in Russia, where, until recently, domestic analysts and commentators [were given some leeway](#) to criticize military decision making. A prime example is Sergei Kozlov, a Spetsnaz expert and former practitioner, who [wrote an article](#) in October 2022 titled “Spetsnaz Used

Not for its Purpose, or Why Fighters with Unique Training are Being Used as Simple Infantry.” The term Spetsnaz (“Special Purpose”) itself already implies that these troops should only be used for unique missions that align with their intended role. Yet, as the title of Kozlov’s article (which is a pun in the original Russian) implies, this has often not been the case during the Russo-Ukraine Conflict. According to Kozlov, the reason for this is that:

“Perhaps, it is precisely because combined arms commanders do not have a sufficiently full understanding of the opportunities that Spetsnaz provides that they are used in the role of assault troops... So, maybe it would be wiser to use special forces for their intended purpose, and not throw them away by having them storm concrete fortifications?”

This raises an important point: the lack of education and understanding throughout the Russian armed forces on what SOF are designed for, as well as how irregular warfare can serve as a strategic and operational level force multiplier, greatly increases the chances of these forces being employed in roles that do not fit their intended mission set. This practice has come with [tremendous casualty rates for Russian SOF](#). As noted by Kozlov, “...[d]uring the course of the [Special Military Operation], the 2nd, 10th, and 22nd Spetsnaz brigades suffered losses that we have not seen since the Afghan-Soviet War.” When providing analysis on why this may be the case, Kozlov and other analysts consistently condemn structural changes in command and control that occurred in the Russian armed forces, such as the transfer of SOF units under the command of the Army’s Land Forces, as well as a lack of understanding of their mission, and few opportunities for joint training between SOF and the rest of the force. Similar issues also persist in Ukraine. While some progress was made prior to Russia’s invasion in improving the Ukrainian military’s understanding of integration between SOF and conventional forces through exercises such as Rapid Trident, the sudden onset of a full-scale conflict cut these efforts short before they could fully reform the traditional approach of conventional commanders taking the lead and SOF following.

It should also be noted that the degree to which Spetsnaz units are used as infantry has changed over the course of the conflict. In Russia’s case, these instances of SOF misapplication correlate with periods where there are [manpower shortages on the frontlines](#), such as during the initial invasion period. On 31 October 2022, prominent Russian military blogger Boris Rozhin [published a claim](#) that special reconnaissance battalions were no longer being used as assault troops and were instead returning to their original focus on reconnaissance operations. It is difficult to determine to what degree these claims are accurate. However, continued discussion in Russian social media of these issues, and continued posting of [videos and stories extolling Russian SOF’s successes in performing assault roles](#), indicate that this tendency to misuse SOF as infantry remains a persistent problem.

UKRAINE’S USE OF SOF: A PROPAGANDA SUCCESS OR FAILURE?

Throughout the conflict, Ukrainian SOF have demonstrated great mastery in classic special operations, especially those focused on direct action. They are attributed with numerous successes, such as effective [raids deep behind enemy lines](#), [sabotage operations](#), and [reconnaissance and human intelligence endeavors](#), among others. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the Ukrainian military has been immune to the tendencies of using SOF as assault troops, which has come at [considerable human cost](#). On 19 June 2023, the official Telegram and Twitter accounts of the Ukrainian SOF Command [posted a video](#) (Warning: the linked video contains graphic violence) of operators from Ukraine’s 73rd Naval Special Operations Center clearing out a trench of Russian soldiers. Although this video went viral, and [received praise](#) for the professionalism displayed by the operators, it is one of many demonstrating

that SOF units have been applied in conventional infantry roles. While videos such as this example are positive in terms of morale, they impact perceptions of SOF activities and create the illusion among conventional commander ranks that this is how SOF is meant to be used.

In addition, as both [Ukrainian and Russian users battle in the information environment](#) to control narratives about the course of the conflict, such videos and stories of SOF exploits can be valuable tools in demonstrating success and creating confidence in the military during crucial stages of a campaign. At the same time, however, such videos, and the details they reveal, might be used by the adversary to denigrate their opponent. Such an example occurred on 30 August 2023, when a prominent pro-Kremlin Telegram channel, *Reverse Side of the Medal*, [reposted](#) a video originally seen on the Ukrainian SOF Command's Telegram account with the following commentary:

“Special operations forces were thrown into an assault on heavily fortified positions. This means that either infantry is not being used for assaults and Spetsnaz is being thrown in instead, or that the infantry has failed to achieve any results and Spetsnaz was sent in its stead...This demonstrative moment shows that things are not going nearly as well for our adversary as Ukrainian analysts say. To gain a breakthrough during battle, both we and our opponent are throwing our elites into the most difficult areas... We saw how our adversary lost some of their best forces on useless attempts to gain a breakthrough at least somewhere.”

With many in Russia and Ukraine using social media as their [primary source of information](#) about the ongoing conflict, the successes and failures of SOF operations have become a hot topic of discussion. This attention, in turn, can be used to influence the opinion of soldiers, the general population, and the international community. When a British news outlet, *The Financial Times*, published [an article in July 2023](#) where an anonymous Ukrainian source, “complained that his special forces unit was now being forced to fight ‘like regular infantry,’” the reaction from the Kremlin propaganda ecosystem was immediate. The Russian state-owned news service, *RIA Novosti*, [cited the article](#) as evidence that the Ukrainian forces were in dire straits. This message was then amplified by major pro-Kremlin military bloggers, such as Alexander Kots, who [commented](#) that the Ukrainian Armed Forces are using their Spetsnaz to “plug holes” in their ranks. As the conflict continues, decisions to use SOF as assault troops will have to take into account not only the immediate costs and risks of such operations, but also longer-term consequences such as how they will be perceived by the soldiers themselves, the public, and international observers.

CONCLUSION

The experience of the Russo-Ukraine Conflict demonstrates the dangers of using SOF in ways that do not fit their intended purpose. While such operations might give short-term, tactical gains, they must be counterbalanced by the costs and potential loss of important strategic and operational capacities. Instead of conducting unsupported daytime frontal assaults against enemy trenches, they should be deployed to go after strategic and operational-level targets, such as key road and rail bridges that enable enemy logistics, developing high-payoff options, and supporting resistance efforts in occupied territories, all of which can lead to significant long-term advantages.

The first step is creating a SOF employment concept that establishes how such units fit into the strategic and operational chain of command. SOF units work best when put under SOF commanders that understand the strategic value they can bring to an operation. Yet, even if SOF units are reassigned to SOF commanders, it is crucial to institutionally educate commanders and staff at all levels, especially

in combined arms formations, on the role and purpose of SOF. This also applies to IW more generally, as it has now become an inextricable part of war that affects its conduct on all levels. Without a clear understanding of what SOF are, and what they can do, commanders and personnel will be limited in their ability to understand how they fit into broader strategic planning, how to coordinate joint operations, and how to properly manage limited SOF resources.

The second step is creating opportunities to put these concepts into practice. An ongoing issue in Ukraine, for example, is the [lack of opportunity for joint training](#) between SOF, conventional units, and other branches. During an ongoing war, where every highly trained operator is in high demand in the field, training opportunities can be constrained by both manpower shortages and time. This also affects conventional force commanders, as there is little time available to properly educate them on SOF employment. This creates a vicious cycle: insufficient preparation and training results in improper employment and heavier than necessary casualties, which, in turn, creates manpower shortages that further cut available training time. This issue is difficult to resolve during an ongoing war but can be significantly eased by establishing effective training programs and procedures prior to the outbreak of hostilities.

Finally, the rise of social media reporters and military bloggers as major news sources on wartime developments means that the successes and failures of SOF have become an important part of propaganda and information warfare. When SOF are expended in conventional infantry roles, it exposes a vulnerability that an adversary can exploit both militarily and psychologically. As a result, decision making on how to best employ SOF, as well as how their exploits are depicted, must now take these broader considerations into account.