



# INSIGHTS

Vol. 1, No. 8, September 2023

## *The Fall from Grace of Russian SOF: The Danger of Forgetting Lessons Learned*

As part of its ongoing efforts to help scholars and practitioners understand Russia's approach to irregular warfare (IW), the Irregular Warfare Center (IWC) translated a [33-page Russian special operations journal article](#), *The Fundamentals of Partisan Warfare: Theory and Practice*. The Russian article is now available for request on the IWC website. This Insights article is the first of a two-part series meant to introduce the Russian text and apply the concepts contained within to the current conflict in Ukraine.

For the Russian armed forces, the ongoing war in Ukraine has been a challenge that includes both a conventional war on the frontlines and an unconventional war in occupied territories. As a result, questions on how to correctly employ special operations forces (SOF) have become increasingly relevant for Russian commanders. Yet, this is not the first time that Russia has struggled with the questions of how SOF should be employed. Many of the [mistakes](#) being made by Russian military leaders today—such as [assuming a quick victory](#), underestimating the opponent, and [incorrectly using special operations forces](#)—are similar to those they made during the Second Chechen War (1999-2009). Around 2008, following many years of [failed counterinsurgency efforts](#) in Chechnya, a group of Russian military practitioners and researchers began [calling for a change](#) in how Russia approaches special operations. As Russian operations in Ukraine fail, losses continue to mount, and possible [insurgencies rise up in Russia](#) itself, these past suggestions might once again become a hot topic of discussion among Russian military leadership looking for new strategies to employ in Ukraine.

As part of its ongoing efforts to help researchers and practitioners understand Russia's approach to irregular warfare (IW), the Irregular Warfare Center (IWC) has translated a [33-page Russian special operations journal article](#), *The Fundamentals of Partisan Warfare: Theory and Practice*. Written in response to the author's observations of the Second Chechen War, this Russian article analyzes two major problems in Russia's military approach, which can also be observed in the current war in Ukraine: the [incorrect application of special](#)

*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.*

ANDREW LIFLYANDCHICK  
*IWC Analyst*

DEREK JONES, COL. (RET.), US ARMY  
*IWC Subject Matter Expert*



SANDOR FABIAN, PH.D.  
*IWC Chair of Engagements*

[operations forces](#) and an [overemphasis on conventional war](#), while not giving enough focus to certain irregular forms of conflict such as partisan warfare. In this article, the author makes the case for the creation of a radically new military doctrine and force structure—one focused entirely on irregular warfare. The tactics, techniques, and procedures discussed in this monograph also have relevance for Russia today. As its war with Ukraine continues well into its second year, [there are signs](#) that the Russian military has been making centralized efforts to change its approach to the war, which has led to deviation from previous doctrine. If this holds true for special operations, then previous Russian literature on the subject, such as the wave of lessons learned that followed the Chechen Wars, might become the basis for the reevaluation Russian strategy in Ukraine.

The author of *The Fundamentals of Partisan Warfare: Theory and Practice* is Lieutenant Colonel Oleg Ryazanov, a Spetsnaz veteran with years of experience teaching special operators at Russia's Ministry of Internal Affairs University. He has written many other book and articles on the topic of special operations for use in military education and instruction, such as *The Art of Sniping* in 2004 and, in 2009, a historic examination of the Russian empire's use of partisans during WWI.

The Russian article is divided into two sections. The first is an in-depth analysis of partisan and counter-partisan tactics and strategies covering a wide variety of fields spanning from raids to psychological warfare to irregular medicine. It draws not only on experiences in Chechnya but also from Russian scholars in the field (e.g., Ilya Starinov and Vladimir Kvachkov), as well as classic resistance literature (e.g., Guevara and Mao). The second section is an examination of how special operations forces (SOF) are viewed and employed in Russia and a comparison to how they are viewed and employed in the United States. This *Insights* article will focus primarily on the second aspect of the monograph with the first topic, partisan tactics, being covered in a future article.

To understand how Russia views irregular warfare today, one of the first steps should be to analyze the Second Chechen War and the subsequent years of Russian military modernization. After all, for many of the top Russian military brass currently leading the war, such as the current top commander in Ukraine, Valery Gerasimov and his predecessor, Sergey Surovikin, the Chechen conflict was both [a formative experience and a brutal lesson](#) on the challenges of irregular war. Many of the modern Russian conceptualizations in IW areas of interest, such as counterinsurgency (COIN), counterterrorism (CT), and special operations forces (SOF), were developed in direct response to the failures of both Russian conventional and special operations forces in combating the insurgent Chechen guerilla forces. *Fundamentals of Partisan Warfare* is both a sober evaluation of Russian COIN, CT, and SOF capabilities from an operator's perspective and a vision for its future.

Some of the proposed reforms suggested in this article were later realized by the Russian government. Within the period of 2008 to 2014, there was a [major structural reshuffling](#) of Russia's special operations forces. This also included additional recognition of the importance of SOF at the highest level, including the creation of a [professional day](#) in their honor in 2015—demonstrating a sharp change from previous attitudes. A discussion of the high impact that SOF can play in modern military strategy was also a part of [the article](#) that would later become the basis for the often [misinterpreted and misrepresented](#) “Gerasimov Doctrine.” The term doctrine, in this case, can be greatly misleading; these ideas never reached the standardization or widespread acceptance across the Russian armed forces that a doctrine would have in the U.S. or NATO understanding. This lack of consistency helps explain why even with the adoption of “new-generation warfare” by certain elements of the military, the new possibilities of SOF application were not universally embraced. As a result, the disdain that Ryazanov describes with which the Russian conventional force views special operations was never truly rooted out, despite efforts to change this perception through structural reforms.

At the time of the Second Chechen War, the structure of Russian military SOF differed significantly from those of the United States. These units were not integrated into military theater commands and [did not have their own equivalent of the U.S. Special Operations Command \(USSOCOM\)](#). Instead, SOF were seen as a part of intelligence operations, with operators being divided between the GRU (military intelligence), FSB (civilian security service), and various other agencies. This disorganized and decentralized nature of Russian military special operations of the time, especially when compared to their Western counterparts, is what inspired Ryazanov to write his article and propose sweeping reforms. It should also be noted that in Russia, the term

“Spetsnaz” cannot be used interchangeably with SOF. [Spetsnaz is a broader term](#) that refers to elite units in all parts of the Russian government, including police and drug enforcement, and not just the military. The proposed changes to SOF structure did not include the replacement of Spetsnaz, but rather the creation of a separate SOF under the armed forces.

To understand the failures of Russian military special operations policy today, it is first necessary to analyze what issues prompted the formation of a separate Russian Special Operations Command. When the conflict in Chechnya devolved into a drawn-out guerilla campaign, the Russian military at the time found that it possessed neither the training nor the expertise to successfully conduct operations against irregular formations. The national guard (“Rosgvardia”), which serves as Russia’s internal military force component with COIN training, had not yet been created. As a result, responsibility for the “anti-terrorist operation,” a term that would soon be associated with brutality and atrocities which blurred the lines between CT and COIN, was [delegated to the FSB](#) in 2001.

However, the FSB also found itself ill-prepared to conduct CT and COIN operations efficiently, and it failed to prevent numerous high-profile terrorist attacks by Chechen insurgents such as the [Beslan School Siege](#) in 2004, which resulted in hundreds of civilian casualties. As a result of these dire failings, the Russian government was forced to, yet again, transfer the reins. This time, responsibility for the stabilization of the region went to the forces of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) and local pro-Russian Chechen forces. Yet, it would be many more years of catastrophic failures and losses before the insurgency would finally be suppressed in 2009.

This eye-opening experience made clear that no group in Russia—not the Russian military, the security services, or the government—had the standardized training and unified strategic doctrine needed to effectively fight in partisan and irregular wars. Scholars and practitioners, including one of the most influential Russian military thinkers in the field, Colonel Vladimir Kvachkov, [began calling for a reevaluation](#) of these concepts and doctrines using the lessons learned in Chechnya. It is during this wave of reforms that the author of *The Fundamentals of Partisan Warfare* calls for a “new philosophy [which] must be used as the basis for creating a Russian military doctrine, in which the top priority should be given to partisan warfare in all its forms.” The first step in this new approach is, Ryazanov argues, the formation of a new military command dedicated to special operations, which would train operators in the art of irregular warfare, partisan and counter-partisan tactics, COIN, and CT.

These new proposals for reform gained traction in the Russian military commands [as early as 2008](#), and the work of moving SOF out from under the shadow of the intelligence services began. However, it would not be until March 2013 that Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov would formally announce the new Russian Special Operations Forces Command (KSSO). This announcement came just three weeks after Gerasimov published his “[Gerasimov doctrine](#),” which, among other considerations, highlighted the important role that SOF would play in what Gerasimov considered a new generation of warfare.

Gerasimov [openly admitted](#) that the new command was heavily modeled on Western special force commands, such as U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM). Russian scholars and practitioners in the field of special operations had long studied the successes and failures of Western special operations units, especially those of the United States. During his announcement of the formation of the KSSO, [Gerasimov stated](#) that it had come as a result of “Having studied the practice of the formation, training, and application of special operations by the leading foreign powers.” Ryazanov also emphasizes the importance of analyzing U.S. SOF doctrine. A significant portion of his article is dedicated to examining what he calls the “U.S. Approach.” In the words of the author, “...our potential adversary takes partisan warfare and other non-traditional methods of warfare quite seriously. When we talk about the inertia of the American military and their unhealthy adherence to traditions, we should instead take a closer look at how and what is being done in the Russian army.”

In the following years, Russian SOF had a string of successes such as foreign internal defense operations in Syria, information warfare in Ukraine, and effective use of new technologies such as drones. This created a [perception in the West](#) that the structural reforms had been broadly successful. Russian special forces, operating without official identification as “[little green men](#),” created the pre-conditions for a successful Russian invasion and annexation of Crimea in 2014. All of this gave Russia’s SOF a reputation worldwide as a well-trained, modern, and effective force that had a wide-range of capabilities and the [potential to rival](#) its counterparts in the United States.



However, despite all these attempted changes in structure and attitude, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has shown the lack of evolution in Russia's SOF approach. Even with Ryazanov's warning about the importance of SOF in irregular warfare, Russian military leadership has used SOF as [reconnaissance units and light infantry](#), essentially using them in a primarily conventional capacity. They have also been [used on the frontlines as replacements](#) for dwindling reserves of troops. This has meant that the failure of the initial invasion to end the war within days, as originally planned, exposed these units to [severe casualties](#). These losses might take years, if not decades, to recover from, as elite units with high levels of training are [not a capability that can be easily replenished](#) with additional mobilizations or conscriptions.

In addition, many direct action operations conducted by Russian SOF, even those that may have attained their tactical goals or [worked in the past](#), may nevertheless fail to result in strategic success due to [poor planning and intelligence](#). Tactical irregular warfare prowess does not make up for poor strategy. There has been surprisingly [little open-source information](#) reported about specific Russian SOF operations in comparison to the prominent role they played in 2014, signaling Russia's [increasing preference for conventional tools](#) over unconventional ones.

However, there are well-documented cases of how other Spetsnaz forces have performed, and their track record so far has been mixed at best. For example, within hours of the invasion being announced, Russian airborne forces (VDV) began an operation to capture the strategically important Antonov Airport near Kyiv. The expectation was that this would enable the decapitation of the Ukrainian government in a matter of days. Although the airport was eventually captured, it was only achieved with a significant delay after the initial group was repelled by [heavier-than-expected Ukrainian resistance](#). As a result, the airport was rendered inoperable, and Russia's plans for a quick end to the war crumbled. This would be just one of the instances where Russian special operations failed to turn the tide of the conflict.

Likewise, the effectiveness of Russian special operations in occupied territories has not lived up to expectations. Despite extensive efforts to root out the Ukrainian resistance and to counter Ukrainian special operations in these areas, Russian forces have [failed to stabilize their control](#). In a mirror of the Chechen War years, the FSB, with the support of local collaborators, has [taken the lead in counter-resistance](#) in occupied territories, with the [FSB bringing in its own Spetsnaz and CT specialists](#). These groups have, in turn, adopted tactics [straight from Soviet manuals](#): filtration centers, deportations, brutal raids and massacres, mass collection of citizen data, and informant networks. Although these forms of repression can be effective under certain conditions (e.g., in a scenario where the populace has a low willingness to resist), the Russian occupation strategy has lacked consistency and adaptability. In Ryazanov's ideal world, the KSSO, the military special operations force with experience in counterinsurgency and counter-partisan operations, should have been the driving force behind this counter-resistance effort. Although KSSO forces [have been deployed to assist](#) in a limited capacity in the occupied territories, the fact that this command is [significantly smaller than and overshadowed by](#) conventional military and FSB Spetsnaz units, in part due to being fully volunteer-based, has meant that they do not possess the numbers to take a leading role and have a decisive impact.

As for the counter-resistance operations of the FSB and local administrations, the lack of consistency in training and discipline has played a role. These units have demonstrated low adaptability when confronted with situations that do not follow operational manuals, which is a [vital skill](#) when dealing with an underground resistance hidden among an uncooperative population. Instead, they have often defaulted to shooting first and asking questions later. Ryazanov describes partisan warfare as "a genuine art that disdains repetition and always surprises the enemy with unique solutions... [which] develops a creative personality in both the common soldier and the commander." This ability to adapt to situations with creativity and innovation is something that has been sorely lacking among Russian troops. Had a larger emphasis been put on training for irregular tactics, such as those described by Ryazanov in his article, then the results may have been different. That being said, this does not mean that Russia's SOF capabilities can be completely disregarded. There are indicators that the Russian military has been making attempts at [changing its approach to the war in various aspects](#) and deviating from previous doctrine. These reevaluations are likely to extend to special operations forces as well and this must be taken into account when planning countermeasures.

In conclusion, the relatively low overall operational impact that Russia's SOF has had in Ukraine, especially when compared with its previously high reputation worldwide, shows that forgetting lessons learned from past conflicts, even those as distant as the Second Chechen War, can lead to a failure to adapt to the modern operating environment. The [roles and limits of special operations are constantly evolving](#) as the number of tools available increases and strategic objectives shift. SOF strategy and doctrine must evolve with them. This does not mean that lessons learned must be discarded, but rather that they should serve as the building blocks for new strategies that avoid past mistakes. The failure of the Russian military to adequately prepare its special operations strategy for its war in Ukraine, likely due to the assumption that past successes would repeat themselves, has led to a fall from grace for Russian SOF. In this context, evaluations of past Russian IW tactics, techniques, and procedures as well as an examination of the challenges they have faced, such as those contained in the Russian article translated by the IWC, can help understand what went wrong for Russian special operations and what solutions they might adopt for future changes in strategies and doctrine. The understanding of these potential changes will be critical in allowing the West and its allies to develop their own effective doctrines and strategies to effectively counter Russian special operations in future conflicts.

*The views expressed are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the Department of Defense, Defense Security Cooperation Agency, or the Irregular Warfare Center.*