

How do Moscow's spetsnaz operate?

The U.S. Defense Department, in its latest annual review of Soviet capabilities, Soviet Military Power, describes the Soviet Union's spetsnaz, or special commando-force deployments as follows:

Soviet unconventional warfare is defined as a variety of military and paramilitary operations including partisan warfare, subversion, and sabotage, conducted during periods of peace and war, and including other operations of a covert or clandestine nature.

The Soviets have used unconventional forces and methods in the past:

- Bolsheviks employed partisan guerrilla units against the Czarists and other opponents during the Russian Civil War of 1917 to 1920.

- Soviet partisan forces were extensively used against the Germans during World War II.

- Special purpose troops were used to crush resistance to Soviet domination over Eastern Europe.

- Soviet special purpose forces were used in the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. . . .

- Soviet special purpose forces played an important role in the invasion of Afghanistan and the elimination of President Amin.

Soviet unconventional warfare activities are managed at the highest level of government authority. The Committee for State Security (KGB) and the Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) of the General Staff can be assumed to plan and execute Soviet unconventional warfare operations. . . .

The Soviet leadership has a variety of elite forces for conducting unconventional warfare missions: special units of the KGB, GRU, Airborne and Ground and Naval Forces. The KGB special purpose units have a sabotage mission and are thought to be targeted primarily against the civilian sector. Their tasks would be to create general panic among the civilian population, to disrupt civil government and public utilities, and to damage or destroy key production facilities. . . .

The unconventional warfare units receive intensive training. Each team has an officer in charge who speaks the language of the target country fluently. In addition to the normal military training, special skills are emphasized: 1) tactics of infiltrating and exfiltrating the target area; 2) night operational linkups; 3) sabotage methods using explosives, incendi-

aries, acids, and abrasives; 4) clandestine communications; 5) hand to hand combat and silent killing techniques. . . .

Soviet writings point out the effectiveness of UW [unconventional warfare] units and record the accomplishments in World War II: "During the war the partisans killed, wounded or took prisoner hundreds of thousands of German troops, collaborators, and officials of the occupation administration. They derailed more than 18,000 trains, and destroyed or damaged thousands of locomotives, and tens of thousands of railway cars and cisterns. The partisan war affected the morale of the German Army, keeping the German troops in a constant state of fear."

Use of unconventional warfare is a basic element of Soviet doctrine, and Soviet capabilities in this respect constitute a formidable threat.

U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency analyst James Hanson, in an article in International Defense Review November 1984, emphasizes spetsnaz deployments as counters to Western arms. Hanson says that the Soviets' military art is based on what their military men call the "law of the negation of the negation," which means that Western weapons which appear to threaten or "negate" Soviet weapons must be countered.

Soviet special-operations forces could search out and destroy, or otherwise degrade NATO's nuclear weapons. These elite units, similar to U.S. Special Forces or Rangers, could be tasked to strike any type of nuclear delivery unit or storage facility. . . .

The Soviets rarely mention their own special operations forces in open literature. According to Colonel B. Samorukov, the "reconnaissance-diversionary groups" (in Russian military terminology, "diversionary" means sabotage) can destroy the enemy's means of nuclear attack, overcome obstructions and important natural barriers, and seize key positions and communications centers. . . . These special forces have a "high degree of independence" and are "very extensively used" for critical missions in the combat structure of field forces, but are expected to produce the greatest success "when they are used suddenly."

The most versatile of these special units are the small spetsnaz ("special designation") teams. These forces represent a flexible, diverse, and unconventional attack capability against NATO. . . . Unlike Soviet line soldiers, these commanders are independent-minded troops who can readily adjust to a strange battlefield while maintaining a low profile.

Spetsnaz forces would most likely work with agents previously placed in the target regions. Shortly before outbreak of war, Moscow would activate these assets—known as "sleepers" in Western intelligence jargon, and as "frozen" agents in Russian. Some of them would meet incoming spetsnaz teams, guide them to weapons caches and target areas, and provide other support as required. This concept resembles the French maquis operations of World War II. . . .