

Putin's Playbook: The Development of Russian Tactics, Operations, and Strategy from Chechnya to Ukraine



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Abstract To better understand the reasons for and methods of Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine on February 24th, 2022 one needs to look at Putin's entire period in power—from August 1999 to the battlefields of present-day Ukraine. During the more than two decades in question, the former KGB officer learned how to wage war—partly by drawing upon methods from Russia's past, partly by adapting Western models of war, and even partly through innovation and learning. From Chechnya in the fall of 1999 to the present fighting in Ukraine, Putin has been attempting new methods and making them his own—adding to his playbook, if you will, just as a coach does who studies and learns from repeated engagements with opponents. Only this playbook is one of assassination, genocide, and regime toppling, all with the goal of resurrecting remnants of the Russian Empire. This chapter surveys Putin's wars, attempting to analyze the tactics, operations, and strategies that he employs. Such an analysis is intended to shed light on how Putin wages war so the U.S. can better counter his moves, from the diplomatic realm to the battlefield.

Keywords Great power competition · Russia · Ukraine · National security · Central region

1 Introduction

On February 24, 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin launched the largest military conflict in Europe since World War II when his forces invaded the sovereign country of Ukraine. With approximately 140,000 troops arrayed along Ukraine's border with

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Russia and Belarus—and a third axis of advance coming from the south from Russian-annexed Crimea—more than half of Ukraine’s territory was encircled by Russian forces (and this does not include airborne troops that were fully prepared for their role in the invasion). Indeed, in the weeks and months leading up to the invasion, Putin’s war machine was being assembled while the Kremlin denied any belligerent intentions, arguing right up to the days before the actual invasion that these military forces were simply engaged in an exercise and that the West was in “hysteria.”¹ In the early hours of that fateful day in late February, Kyiv’s and indeed much of the world’s fears became reality, as Russian forces illegally and without provocation invaded Ukraine.

Rather than being an extreme and unusual act for Putin, the invasion of Ukraine was in fact the culmination of more than two decades of increasingly emboldened military action by Russia’s dictator. His belligerent behavior began almost immediately upon his rise to power. In fact, the more power he has accumulated in his hands, the more belligerent he has become. Within weeks of being named President Boris Yeltsin’s prime minister in August 1999, bombs ripped through apartment buildings in Moscow followed by similar attacks in two other Russian cities. When the dust settled, more than 300 people were dead and more than 1000 were injured, spreading a wave of fear across the country that set the stage for the launching of the Second Chechen War. While this may read like a story of retaliation, there is widespread speculation—and accumulating evidence—that the apartment bombings were a “false flag” operation conducted by the FSB, Russia’s Federal Security Bureau.² While not in line with Chechen behavior up to or following that time, this event generated great sympathy among Russians for a renewed attack on the secessionist republic. What followed over the next nearly quarter of a century was an evolution of Putin’s playbook, as he tried out different tactical actions, operational approaches, and strategic engagements within Russia’s “near abroad,” the territories of Estonia, Georgia, and Ukraine so far, but also with an eye on Kazakhstan, Moldova, and Belarus.

2 The Second Chechen War

Over the course of more than two years, Moscow decimated the Republic of Chechnya, leaving it in rubble. But it was not the utter destruction of Chechnya—which was massive—that brought Chechnya’s acquiescence to Kremlin rule. Rather, it was the cooption of a Sufi cleric, the Mufti Akhmad Kadyrov (father of Ramzan Kadyrov, the current president of the Republic of Chechnya). Putin recognized that the radical form of Wahhabist Islam fueling the flames of separatism in Chechnya

¹ Isachenkov, V. (2022, February 15). Russians scoff at Western fears of Ukraine invasion. <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-colin-powell-joe-biden-business-vladimir-putin-d9246bee4d6aee4fdd27aa9e1e738f0c>. Accessed 23 April 2023.

² Litvinenko, A., and Y. Felshinsky. (2007). *Blowing Up Russia: Terror from Within*. London: Gibson Square Books.

was not home-grown, but rather an import from the Middle East (Saudi Arabia, to be precise). Indeed, the Chechen separatist movement began as a purely secular nationalist movement under former Soviet Air Force General Dzhokhar Dudaev and his supporters. But after Dudaev's targeted killing in 1996, more radical members of the movement ascended to the helm of the separatist cause, including Aslan Maskhadov, Shamil Basaev, and the self-proclaimed "emir of the Caucasus" Ibn al-Khattab.³ Al-Khattab was killed in 2002 by a poisoned letter delivered by a courier in a covert operation planned by the FSB—another tactic that Putin would employ against several of his enemies. Al-Khattab was a proponent and scholar of radical Islamist ideology. Putin was wise enough to understand that if he could make a deal with a more moderate Muslim leader who would be willing to be installed in power, then many Chechens would side with this person. Given his religious credentials and fighting experience (he had fought against Russia in the First Chechen War), the Sufi Mufti Akhmad Kadyrov made a good choice. The strategy worked, and though Kadyrov would be assassinated in 2004 by the same radicals he was there to replace, Moscow was able to hold onto Chechnya and despite assessments by outside observers must be seen as a successful COIN operation.⁴

Putin's first move once in power, therefore, was to set his house in order. The tactics, operations, and strategies he used eventually included mass destruction, high civilian casualty numbers, false flag operations, the poisoning of HVTs (high value targets), and the cooption of local leaders who can move into positions of power and engage in localized rule under Putin's thumb. Chechnya was where Putin added many of these tactical plays to his ever-growing playbook.

With independence-minded Chechnya brought to heel, Putin perhaps felt secure for a bit, but only for a limited time. As Putin was bringing Chechnya under control, the United States suffered the 9/11 attacks, and then engaged first in operations in Afghanistan to eradicate Al-Qaeda's safe-haven before moving on to deal with the unfinished business in Iraq beginning in March 2003. Russia went from sympathizer of the US after the 9/11 attacks to leery observer of American military might playing out across the globe. The fact that NATO members—and aspiring members—were joining in these multinational operations just added fuel to the fire for Russia and those who feared NATO, and increasingly the West more broadly.

Meanwhile, much was happening in Russia's near abroad. In the Baltic region, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were working hard to join Western economic and security structures, primarily the EU and NATO, joining both institutions in 2004. Farther south, some in Ukraine and Georgia were also aspiring to follow the Baltic example. In Georgia in November 2003, a series of demonstrations over disputed parliamentary elections led to the ouster of former Soviet foreign minister and then president of Georgia Eduard Shevardnadze and his kleptocratic government, marking

³ Murphy, P. (2004). *The Wolves of Islam: Russia and the Faces of Chechen Terror*. London: Brassey's.

⁴ Here I am referring to studies that label Russia's COIN operation in Chechnya a failure. See, for example, C. Paul, C. Clarke, and B. Grill (2010). *Victory has a thousand fathers: Sources of success in counterinsurgency*. Santa Monica, CA: Rand.

the end of the Soviet-era leadership in the country. The climactic moment of the revolution was when demonstrators, led by Western-educated Mikheil Saakashvili, stormed the Parliament with red roses in their hands.

A year later a similar “color revolution” (as such popular revolutionary movements have come to be called) played out in Ukraine where protesters assembled in sub-zero weather to protest the run-off election for president between Viktor Yushchenko (who was recovering from Dioxin poisoning from earlier that fall, with suspicions being that it was due to an operation led by Russia’s security services⁵) and Viktor Yanukovich, Putin’s man in Ukraine. Peaceful protesters wearing orange claimed the elections were rigged by the authorities and that the elections were fraught with massive corruption, voter intimidation, and general electoral fraud. The movement’s campaign of civil resistance (thousands of protesters demonstrating daily) was highlighted by a series of acts of civil disobedience, sit-ins, and general strikes organized by the opposition. Finally, after a second run-off election, Yushchenko was declared the winner and another color revolution was successful. Putin’s efforts and his supported candidate had failed to stem the tide of democracy in his own near abroad.

The Rose Revolution in Georgia and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine—coupled with the Baltic Republics’ joining the EU and NATO—all appeared to Moscow as meddling in Russia’s backyard. American and Baltic security and democratic victories in Ukraine and Georgia came at the cost of Russian insecurity, and the Baltic Republics were the first place Putin began to play the Russian identity card, first pushing for citizenship rights for ethnic Russians living in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, and eventually even pushing for the Russian language to be added to the list of official EU languages (due to the fact that Russian-speakers comprised a significant proportion of the Baltic populations). Putin had identified a cultural and social cleavage that he could play upon to push back against what he increasingly perceived as US encroachment into Moscow’s sphere of influence.

3 The Munich Security Conference and Estonia

The year 2007 was a turning point in many regards, both in terms of Putin’s exploitation of the ethnic Russian cleavage and in his outspoken opinion regarding the global employment of American military might. In early February of 2007, Putin delivered a speech at the Munich Security Conference in which he chastised the US for its international behavior. “One state,” he said—“the US—has overstepped its national borders in every way. Well, who likes this? Who is happy about this?” Certainly not Putin, who continued by stating that the US had reneged on its pledge not to expand NATO “even one inch” to the East. Putin finally questioned the purpose of NATO’s existence itself and its expansion:

⁵ (2004, December 11). Yushchenko and the poison theory. *BBC News*. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/4041321.stm>. Accessed 23 April 2023.

I think it is obvious that NATO expansion does not have any relation with the modernization of the Alliance itself or with ensuring security in Europe. On the contrary, it represents a serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust. And we have the right to ask: against whom is this expansion intended?⁶

Putin was adding another page to his playbook—rewriting history and employing disinformation (*dezinformatsiya*⁷ in Russian) to weave a particular narrative. As a point of fact, Manfred Wörner—NATO Secretary General in 1990 at the time of German reunification, was only referring to the stationing of NATO troops on East German territory after reunification. The so-called “promise,” moreover, was not included in any written agreement, nor did it relate to the future of NATO and new member-states. As with all mis- and disinformation, this claim contained seeds of truth. But Putin was primarily appealing to his domestic audience at this venue (though Andrew Michta claims that the speech must be seen as nothing less than a “declaration of war on the West”).⁸ Putin’s Munich speech proved very popular at home and fed the growing anti-American sentiment across Russia.

By Spring 2007 Putin was adding another page to his playbook—inciting ethnic cleavages among Russians and local populations in post-Soviet states. This episode began over the decision of the Tallinn city government to relocate a Soviet war monument to a more remote location in a military cemetery. This move made sense to the Estonian government, since the entire period of Soviet rule over the Estonian nation was deemed illegal, and Estonia was a free and independent state and could do what it wanted with such monuments. Estonia simply relocating the monument to a military cemetery in another part of the capital city led to two nights of riots (known as the “bronze nights,” in reference to the bronze soldier statue that was moved), a week-long siege of the Estonian embassy in Moscow, and cyberattacks on Estonian governmental and civic organizations. Again, *dezinformatsiya* was put into high gear and what amounted to a municipal parks decision culminated in a cyber disruption. Putin made sure that messages were spread that created tension between the ethnic Estonians and the Russian-speaking population of the country, many of whom lamented the collapse of the Soviet Union and were looking for a reason to speak out against the situation that left them as second-class citizens in independent Estonia.

The episode was not limited to inciting the local population with disinformation. The Kremlin added another page to its playbook—offensive cyberspace operations by proxy. Russia targeted the websites of Estonian institutions, including the Estonian parliament, banks, ministries, and newspapers, and broadcasters. Most of the attacks that had any influence on the public were distributed denial of service type attacks.

⁶ V. Putin (2007, February 10). Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>. Accessed 21 April 2023.

⁷ Shultz, R., and R. Godson (1984). *Dezinformatsia: Active Measures in Soviet Strategy*. Washington, DC: Pergamon-Brassey's.

⁸ Michta, Andrew A. (2022, August 7). China, Russia and the West's Crisis of Disbelief. *Wall Street Journal*. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-russia-and-the-west-s-crisis-america-democracy-fight-military-threat-disarmament-cold-war-putin-xi-response-11659892566>. Accessed 21 April 2023.

Some observers determined that the onslaught against Estonia's cyber domain was of a sophistication not seen before, and the case is studied intensively by many countries and military planners as the first internet war (although at the time it occurred, it was the second-largest instance of state-sponsored cyberwarfare, only superseded by China's "Titan Rain" attack against the United States⁹).

Rather than retaliate against the attack (which could not be directly attributed to the Russian government or military), Estonia and NATO did two things. First, they established the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defense Center of Excellence (CCDCOE) and then developed the *Tallinn Manual on International Law Applicable to Cyber Warfare*, a report that outlines the body of international law that is considered applicable to the cyber realm.

4 Georgia: The 5-Day War

While the Munich Speech may have been a declaration of war, and the bronze statue incident was the first cyberwar, Putin was preparing for his first expeditionary war (i.e., an actual war beyond Russia's borders). Such an assessment can be made based on how quickly and relatively well-organized his 5-day war against Georgia in August 2008 was. While no longer president—Dmitry Medvedev was in that post at the time while Putin was serving as Prime Minister—Putin took the reins of power to handle military affairs.

The whole affair apparently began with a visit a month prior—in July 2008—by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to Georgia where she stressed the importance of a peaceful resolution of the separatist conflicts ongoing in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, while reaffirming American support for Georgia's NATO bid. Many observers believe that Rice's visit left Saakashvili and his government with the mistaken impression that in a one-on-one fight with Russia, Georgia would have significant US support. Regardless, shortly after Secretary of State Rice's visit to the country, regular exchange of gunfire between Georgian and South Ossetian security forces began.

Just when and how the major hostilities between the two sides started is contested, but most international observers concluded that the Georgian government's decision to target Ossetian militia positions with artillery fire on the evening of August 7th was the proximate cause of the war. Putin, who was attending the opening of the Olympics in Beijing at the time, rushed back to Moscow to direct the military operation himself—an operation that he later admitted was preplanned.¹⁰ On the morning of August 8th, Operation Clear Field was launched with the goal of seizing the South

⁹ Titan Rain. (n.d.). Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/cyber-operations/titan-rain>. Accessed 23 April 2023.

¹⁰ Felgenhauer, P. (2012, August 9). Putin Confirms the Invasion of Georgia Was Preplanned. *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 9(152). <https://jamestown.org/program/putin-confirms-the-invasion-of-georgia-was-preplanned/>. Accessed 13 April 2023.

Ossetian capital of Tskhinvali, bringing Georgian and Russian peacekeeping units into direct conflict with each other. Putin then ordered Russian military units to cross the border into Georgia to reinforce the Russian and South Ossetian forces there. The next day, Russian forces also entered Abkhazia and assisted the Abkhaz forces in taking the Kodori region.

The Russian military, however, moved beyond defending the status quo and entered Georgia proper, as well as striking targets all over the country (including in the capital of Tbilisi). It is also worth pointing out that Putin used his recent page from his playbook— and information operations, during the Russia-Georgia war. In fact, this is considered one of the first wars in which both were integrated into the overall military campaign. Moscow employed hackers to both disrupt Georgian communications and the country's efforts to gain international sympathy and support. Georgia was far from crippled by the attacks against its command-and-control nodes, however, as Georgian citizens and soldiers used cell phones as an intelligence asset to send alerts and even photos to forces informing them of the incoming Russian troops and equipment.

For their part, Moscow's military objective was clear—destroy or neutralize Georgia's military capabilities. As a result of the war, 74 Russian soldiers lay dead, while more than double that number of Georgian soldiers had perished.¹¹ Perhaps more importantly, Georgia's air and naval forces and air-defense systems were severely degraded. Reportedly, Russian forces captured or destroyed a significant portion of the Georgian Army's arsenals. Russian forces seized up to 150 units of Georgian heavy weaponry, including 65 T-72 tanks (44 in operational condition); 15 BMP armored fighting vehicles, and a few dozen armored personnel carriers, vehicles, and SAMs systems.¹²

No Western power intervened to defend or assist Georgia, and Medvedev announced a cessation of hostilities on August 12, although Russian forces continued to take actions to demilitarize Georgia. French president Nicolas Sarkozy, acting on behalf of the European Union, mediated a cease-fire whereby Russia agreed to withdraw to its pre-war positions and Georgia agreed to do the same. Russia, however, was slow to act. By August 26, Putin recognized the full international independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia—citing the Kosovo precedent. Subsequent agreements secured the right for Russia to possess military bases in these territories and eventually Russia argued that it was not obligated to withdraw its forces to pre-war positions.

The Russia-Georgia war was critical for a few reasons. First, it was Putin's first time engaging militarily a foreign force. While he was able to draw upon his playbook to employ cyber and information operations, his forces did not perform as well as he and his commanders had anticipated. According to many reports—including

¹¹ Galeotti, M. (2023). *Russia's Five-Day War: The Invasion of Georgia, August 2008*. Oxford: Osprey, 61. See also M. Galeotti (2022). *Putin's Wars: From Chechnya to Ukraine*. Oxford: Osprey, 120–141.

¹² Galeotti, M. (2023). *Russia's Five-Day War: The Invasion of Georgia, August 2008*. Oxford: Osprey.

most likely Russian after-action reports—Russian forces did not perform as well as expected. In fact, they performed rather poorly against what the Kremlin felt was a greatly inferior force. Additionally, Putin learned something about military diplomacy—once you take ground, there is really no one who can make you give it back.

5 Military Reform and Russia's Special Operations Forces Command

Russia's lackluster performance in the Russia-Georgia war of 2008 led almost immediately to what would become known as the "New Look" military reforms. This major structural reorganization of the Russian Armed Forces was announced in October 2008 and began in early 2009 under Defense Minister Anatoliy Serdyukov. The stated aims of the reforms were to reorganize the structure and the chain of command of the Russian army, to reduce it in size, and build the army around a three-link system (military district—operational command—brigade). While these reforms are critical and deserve our attention, due to limitations of space and the fact that these reforms have been the subject of some excellent analysis,¹³ I focus here on the reforms of Russia's special operations forces (SOF). This includes various *spetsnaz* (*voiska spetsial'nogo naznacheniya*) units—particularly focusing on the standing up of the Russian Special Operations Forces Command and Special Operations Forces (*sily spetsial'nykh operatsii*, or SSO).¹⁴

Russia began reforms between 2008 and 2012 that culminated in the establishment of Russia's own Special Operations Forces Command, but this fact was only made public in 2013. The first piece of the puzzle was the establishment in 2009 of the Directorate of Special Operations (*Upravlenie Spetsial'nykh Operatsii*) centered on a unit based out of a training center in Solnechnogorsk, near lake Senezh. One of the founding fathers was the then Chief of the General Staff General of the Army Anatoly Kvashnin. This unit had seen significant combat in Chechnya during the Second Chechen War.

The second piece of the puzzle was the establishment of a second center in Kubinka-2, also on the outskirts of the Moscow region. This center was directly under the control of the GRU and hence it retained its *spetsnaz* designation, being named the Center of Special Designation (*Tsentr Spetsial'nogo Naznacheniya*). It came to be known as Kubinka. Then finally, on 1 April 2012, upon the initiative of

¹³ Grau, L. and C. Bartles (2016). *The Russian way of war: Force Structure, Tactics, and Modernization of the Russian Ground Forces*. Fort Leavenworth, KS: Foreign Military Studies Office. See also R. McDermott (2012). *The Reform of Russia's Conventional Armed Forces: Problems, Challenges, & Policy Implications*. Washington, DC: Jamestown Foundation.

¹⁴ For a more detailed analysis of Russia's special operations units, see C. Marsh (2017). *Developments in Russian Special Operations: Russia's Spetsnaz, SOF and Special Operations Forces Command*. Kingston, ON: Canadian Special Operations Forces Command. <https://publications.gc.ca/site/eng/9.831086/publication.html>. Accessed 13 April 2023.

Gen. Makarov, the Directorate of Special Operations was renamed the Special Operations Forces Command (*Komandovanie sil spetsial'nalnykh operatsii*, or KSSO). Then on 15 March 2013 Kubinka was joined to the special operations forces.

As early as 2012 Makarov had been talking about forming a KSSO, with plans for up to nine special-purpose brigades and expansion of the existing system of military intelligence special forces (*GRU Spetsnaz*).¹⁵ Intensive physical plant development at both Kubinka and Senezh then began, including infrastructure for basing and military training. Senezh also houses a sniper training school, and both seem to have diver training facilities, though Kubinka apparently includes a special naval operations directorate that controls several special naval operations departments and squads. There is also a cold weather/mountaineering training center at Mount Elbrus named "Terskol," in Kabardino-Balkaria, that is used by Russian special operators for training.¹⁶

As for the manning of these units, although Russia has *spetsnaz* units it could have just pulled from, they did not just rename *spetsnaz* as SOF. Rather, they selected the very best from their regular army, particularly their reconnaissance units, having them first serve with *spetsnaz* units, and then having them undergo specialized training. Only then did they get designated as Russian special operations forces, or SSO.¹⁷

Rather than being a page in his playbook, Russia's KSSO and SSO should be seen as—to quote a former USSOCOM commander—an "exquisite capability."¹⁸ Putin acquired this capability apparently with every intention of using it. They did so with the full intent of using the SSO in missions for which their conventional forces and perhaps existing *spetsnaz* units were incapable of acting independently. But that does not mean that they cannot and/or have not operated alongside *spetsnaz* and conventional forces. Indeed, the SSO have. The most notorious operations they have been involved in have been the seizure of Crimea and the fighting in eastern Ukraine.

¹⁵ McDermott, R. (2016, April 26). Putin's Secret Force Multiplier: Special Operations Forces, *Eurasian Daily Monitor*. 13(81). <https://jamestown.org/program/putins-secret-force-multiplier-special-operations-forces/>. Accessed 13 April 2023.

¹⁶ Mikhailov, A. (2016, April 20). Boitsy Chetvertogo Izmereniya, *Voyenno Promyshlenny Kuryer*. <http://www.vpk-news.ru/articles/30319>. Accessed 10 October 2017.

¹⁷ Nikolsky, A. (2015). Little, Green and Polite: The Creation of Russian Special Operations Forces. In (eds.) C. Howard and R. Pukhov, *Brothers Armed: Military Aspects of the Crisis in Ukraine* (3–22). Minneapolis: EastView.

¹⁸ GEN Richard Clarke (2020). Special Operations Forces Vision and Strategy. MacDill AFB: USSOCOM. <https://www.socom.mil/Documents/SOF%20Vision%20and%20Strategy.pdf>. Accessed 21 April 2023.

6 Euromaidan and the Annexation of Crimea

Beginning on 21 November 2013, large protests, demonstrations, and overall civil unrest spread throughout Ukraine. The center of the affair was Kyiv's *Maidan Nezalezhnosti*, or Independence Square. The protests were sparked when President Viktor Yanukovich suddenly changed his mind and decided not to sign the European Union—Ukraine Association Agreement, apparently choosing closer political and economic ties to Russia and Eurasia. The Ukrainian parliament (the *Verkhovna Rada*) had overwhelmingly approved the decision to sign the EU Agreement, but Putin was putting pressure on Ukraine in a variety of ways to get them to not ratify the agreement. The EU Agreement was very popular with the masses, and the protests rapidly spread and eventually broadened in scope, with calls for Yanukovich to resign. The people assembling at Maidan were protesting what they saw as widespread corruption, abuse of power, and the influence of oligarchs.

Yanukovich attempted to have his henchmen disperse protesters on 30 November, which resulted in extreme violence and only further exacerbated the situation. Though the protests had spread to other cities, repeated assaults on what had grown into a protest base with makeshift barricades only further enflamed the situation, and soon the government introduced severe anti-protest laws. Clashes between police—including the dreaded *Berkut* anti-terror units—became worse and worse until finally Yanukovich and the parliamentary opposition signed an agreement on 21 February 2014 to install an interim government, enact constitutional reforms, and hold elections. Yanukovich and his ministers fled. Though the following day the parliament officially removed Yanukovich from office and installed an interim government, the country was in utter turmoil. In Kyiv, there wasn't even a police force on duty.¹⁹

Putin knew what the power vacuum in Kyiv and the turmoil across Ukraine meant—another color revolution (although this one was going by the name “revolution of dignity,” not by any color or flower). Though they undoubtedly had played important counterterrorism roles prior to this, the invasion of Ukraine in late February 2014 was the real debut of Russian SOF. On 27 February 2014, the military occupation of Crimea by “little green”—and polite—men began. In fact, their involvement began at least several days beforehand, most likely on the 24th (we know, for example, that the 45th Airborne *Spetsnaz* Unit from Kubinka was airlifted to Sevastopol on that day). The 27th, however, is the official date of Crimea “rejoining” the motherland and commemorating the role of Russian SOF.

The plans for the practically bloodless seizure of Crimea were based largely on those drawn up by the General Staff's Main Operations Directorate, relying heavily on GRU intelligence. The GRU had completed its intelligence preparation of the battlefield, was constantly monitoring Ukrainian forces on the peninsula, and intercepting their communications.²⁰ According to Galeotti, the GRU didn't just provide intelligence and cover for the “little green men” who were able to quickly seize control

¹⁹ Sakwa, R. (2015). *Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands*. London: I.B. Tauris.

²⁰ Bradenkamp, N., and M. Grzegorzewski. (2021). Supporting resistance movements in cyberspace. *Special Operations Journal*. 7(1): 17–28.

of all strategic points on the peninsula—many of those very operatives were current or former GRU *spetsnaz*.²¹ Others were members of the naval *spetsnaz*, primarily from the 431st Independent Special Purpose Naval Reconnaissance Point, based out of the Black Sea Fleet.²² In a matter of a few days, Russian forces were able to seize power, block, disarm and even win over significant portions of the Ukrainian military and then to legitimize its presence, all the while conducting information operations and working to integrate the region into the Russian Federation.²³

In many ways their method was a covert unconventional warfare operation. After identifying sympathetic locals (mostly disenfranchised ethnic Russians), they put together a proxy force comprised of a variety of groups—local hooligans, want-to-be political leaders, and even Russians from Russia. Then when the moment was right, “unidentified men in black uniforms” seized government buildings, including the Crimean parliament. An “emergency session” of the parliament was then held and Sergei Aksyonov was chosen as the new prime minister of Crimea. Aksyonov claimed the men were part of Crimea’s self-defense forces and under his personal command (but they were most likely Russian special operators under Kremlin’s control). SOF operators seized other strategic infrastructure, including the headquarters of the Ukrainian Navy in Sevastapol, the headquarters of the Tactical Aviation Brigade in Belbek, and the Marine Battalion in Feodosia. *Spetsnaz* personnel were also involved in several of these operations.²⁴

The rest is history—Crimea then voted to join the Russian Federation, and the Russian *Duma* voted to accept Crimea into the Russian Federation. Finally, Russian forces seized all military bases, etc. on the peninsula. Within a few short weeks, an entire territorial objective had been seized and politically integrated into the Russian Federation, almost with no shots fired, the acme of Sun Tzu’s prescription for warfare. But Putin’s ambitions were far from sated.

7 Eastern Ukraine and the “Novorossiia Campaign”

Juxtaposed to the quick and nearly bloodless seizure of Crimea, which can be seen as a successful special operation from Putin’s point of view, the battle for eastern Ukraine is part of a protracted military campaign that continues in a new guise

²¹ Galeotti, M. (2014, July 7). Putin’s Secret Weapon, *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/07/07/putins-secret-weapon/>. Accessed 21 April 2023.

²² Galeotti, M. (2015). *Spetsnaz: Russia’s Special Forces*. New York: Osprey, 56.

²³ U.S. Army Special Operations Command (2016). “*Little Green Men*”: *A Primer on Modern Unconventional Warfare, Ukraine, 2013–2014*. Fort Bragg, NC: U.S. Army Special Operations Command.

²⁴ Nikolsky, A. (2015). Little, Green and Polite: The Creation of Russian Special Operations Forces. In (eds.) C. Howard and R. Pukhov, *Brothers Armed: Military Aspects of the Crisis in Ukraine* (3–22). Minneapolis: EastView.

even to this day. If we are to study what Putin has attempted to achieve militarily—whether success or failure—we cannot overlook the *Novorossiya* campaign and the continuous fighting in the Donbas between 2014 and the present.

Between February 2014 and May 2015, supporters of the Lugansk People's Republic (LNR) and the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) officially announced the “freezing” of the “*Novorossiya*” project. Oleg Tsaryov, chairman of the *Novorossiya* movement, said that the activities of the Joint Parliament of *Novorossiya* are frozen because the confederation did not comply with the Minsk II accords.

At the start of January 2015, the separatist forces of the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) began a new offensive on Ukrainian-controlled areas, resulting in the complete collapse of the Minsk Protocol ceasefire claiming over 9000 soldiers by summer 2015. From February 2014 to May 2015, *spetsnaz*, SOF, conventional forces, and Private Military Companies (PMCs) participated in the fighting in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine against Ukrainian government security forces, and probably operated outside of that area as well. Both *spetsnaz* units and Russian SOF were deployed in the region, along with conventional forces, though it is unclear exactly who was doing what. Given their mission sets, it is highly likely that both *spetsnaz* and SOF were organizing local insurgent forces, engaging in train and equip missions, and serving as military trainers in general. Additionally, it would be naïve to think that they were not also engaged in direct action missions.

One group they have been working with is led by Igor Girkin, who is in Ukraine under the alias Igor Strelkov (from the Russian word for “shooter”). Strelkov made no efforts to hide the fact that he was engaged in unconventional warfare, with the goal of triggering an armed uprising and separatist movement that would ultimately allow eastern Ukraine to join Russia.²⁵ This retired FSB colonel led a group of more than 50 fighters, many of whom had been active in Crimea before showing up in eastern Ukraine. While not all had formidable fighting experience, the majority did, with several members even coming from the elite *spetsnaz* GRU.²⁶

Immediately following the seizure of Crimea, separatist movements emerged in eastern Ukraine, particularly Donetsk and Luhansk, along with the proclamation in April 2014 of the People's Republic of Donetsk and the People's Republic of Lugansk. This came immediately on the heels of the announcement of the “*Novorossiya* Project.” As Putin himself phrased it as part of his information operations campaign:

I would like to remind you that what was called Novorossiya (New Russia) back in the tsarist days—Kharkov, Lugansk, Donetsk, Kherson, Nikolayev and Odessa—were not part of Ukraine back then. These territories were given to Ukraine in the 1920s by the Soviet government. Why? Who knows. They were won by Potyomkin and Catherine the Great in a series

²⁵ Lavrov, A. (2015). Civil War in the East: How the Conflict Unfolded Before Minsk In (eds.) C. Howard and R. Pukhov, *Brothers Armed: Military Aspects of the Crisis in Ukraine* (204–205). Minneapolis: EastView.

²⁶ Lavrov, A. (2015). Civil War in the East: How the Conflict Unfolded Before Minsk In (eds.) C. Howard and R. Pukhov, *Brothers Armed: Military Aspects of the Crisis in Ukraine* (204). Minneapolis: EastView.

of well-known wars. The center of that territory was Novorossiysk, so the region is called Novorossiya. Russia lost these territories for various reasons, but the people remained.²⁷

This was more than a political statement or part of an information operation—it was the launching phase of a military campaign, one which I label the *Novorossiya* campaign. The goal was to use unconventional warfare methods in the region to mobilize the ethnic Russian population, train, arm, and equip them, and the guide them in a “war of liberation” from Ukraine, all the while maintaining persistent (if not plausible) deniability of Russian government and military involvement. It failed to achieve its objectives before Moscow suspended the project in late May of 2015. But its long-term effects were perhaps visible in the 2022 invasion (and justification for the “special military operation” itself).

The first phase, and this phase very much predates the launching of any military action (and would equate to what we call shaping operations), was to infiltrate Ukrainian political and military structures, not just in the eastern Ukraine region, but in all of Ukraine—including in the government and the military. Along with this phase were inform and influence activities aimed at developing sympathy for the plight of ethnic Russians in Ukraine and dissuading those who would support war with Russia. This phase not only predated the initiation of military operations, but it also continued throughout them, and indeed continued up to the day of the invasion in 2022.

The second phase began with the initiation of military operations, starting with the seizure of Crimea, discussed above. At this point *spetsnaz* and SOF presumably began to organize and enable proxy forces in target regions, with Russian forces operating covertly in Ukraine. This is where more little green men were spotted along with those in sterile uniforms claiming to not be from the Russian Federation Armed Forces, despite sometimes very convincing photographic evidence identifying them as precisely that²⁸ (again, followed with persistent deniability). This phase was crucial for organizing those who would do most of the fighting and would put a local face on the conflict.

The second part of this phase began in June 2014, when Russian conventional forces began to assemble along the Russian-Ukrainian border, including motorized-rifle brigades, artillery units, and armored brigades. This was mostly a show of force but could have been a preparatory move for a possible invasion had things in eastern Ukraine gone differently. Another aspect of this phase was the beginning of internationally organized negotiations in Minsk to arrive at a ceasefire agreement. Of course, this agreement would be nothing more than a delaying move on the part of Russia, allowing *spetsnaz* and SOF more time to organize, train, and equip the proxy

²⁷ Taylor, A. (2014, April 18). “Novorossiya,” the Latest Historical Concept to Worry about in Ukraine. *Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/04/18/understanding-novorossiya-the-latest-historical-concept-to-get-worried-about-in-ukraine/>. Accessed 15 October 2017.

²⁸ Leonard, P. (2014, April 29). This shadowy commander is the face of insurgency In Eastern Ukraine. *Business Insider*. <https://www.businessinsider.com/insurgency-eastern-ukraine-2014-4>. Accessed 23 April 2023.

forces. This became compromised by the shooting down of a Malaysian airliner in July 2014.

As the fighting continued, more and more conventional forces began appearing in the target regions of eastern Ukraine, even while Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko and Putin were meeting in Minsk to negotiate a second ceasefire agreement. Then in late May of 2015 the “*Novorossiya* Project” was closed, apparently with Moscow giving up on a quick victory in the east and settling for a frozen conflict that left the region neither fully under the control of the Ukrainian government nor a part of Russia—yet.²⁹ From the end of the “*Novorossiya* Campaign” until the Russian invasion in 2022 Moscow continued to support separatists in the Donbas. In fact, the day before the invasion Putin recognized the independence of the Donetsk People’s Republic and the Lugansk People’s Republic as sovereign independent countries, which quickly voted to join the Russian Federation, of course.

8 Syria: Russia’s Training Ground

Russia surprised the world in September 2015 when without warning it launched an intervention into the civil war in Syria. In a matter of weeks, Russia went from supplying some weapons, equipment, and naval infantry to an outright intervention on behalf of Assad and his regime. Both *spetsnaz* and SOF were involved in the operations, though according to Galeotti, Russia’s elite units were kept from getting involved in major combat operations, with that mission falling to conventional combat units.³⁰ That left special operators to deal with the other two core missions—battlefield reconnaissance (which in Syria especially involved guiding Russian artillery fires and air strikes) and special security missions.

Of course, it would be naïve to think that *spetsnaz* and SOF were not involved prior to the intervention, providing ISR and perhaps even some training of Assad regime forces.³¹ The Russian news media even highlighted the achievements of their “train and equip” mission in Syria. As they stated, “our military experts and advisors have achieved significant success in the training of the Syrian military.”³²

Additionally, they provided enhanced security for the Russian embassy and other facilities. The “*Zaslón*” (screen) force, for example, deployed some of its men in their usual role of VIP protection, hostage rescue, and reinforcing embassy security, though

²⁹ Dergachev, V. and D. Kirillov. (2015, May 20). Proekt ‘Novorossiya’ Zakrit: Samoprovozglashennyye respubliki ob’yavili o zakritii proekta ‘Novorossiya,’” *Gazeta.ru*. https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2015/05/19_a_6694441.shtml. Accessed 13 April 2023.

³⁰ Galeotti, M. (2016, March 21). The Three Faces of Russian Spetsnaz in Syria. *War on the Rocks*. <https://warontherocks.com/2016/03/the-three-faces-of-russian-spetsnaz-in-syria/>. Accessed 13 April 2023.

³¹ Ramm, A. (2016, February 3). Pervie Pobedy Rossiiskikh Instruktórov – Chast’ I. *Voyenno Promyshlennyy Kuryer*.

³² Ramm, A. (2016, February 3). Pervie Pobedy Rossiiskikh Instruktórov – Chast’ I. *Voyenno Promyshlennyy Kuryer*.

they are also known to conduct security force assistance training. This *spetsnaz* unit does not report to the GRU but reports directly to the Foreign Intelligence Service.

As Russia began its intervention in Syria, Russian SOF and *spetsnaz* were involved in securing the Hmeimim airbase at Latakia and the Tartus naval facility on the Syrian coast. They were then subsequently involved in providing some limited reconnaissance to assist in the targeting of airstrikes.³³ According to one source, most targeting packages came from the Syrians (which may help explain the concentration not on the Islamic State and its forces but on other rebel groups posing a more immediate threat to the Assad regime).

At the peak of the deployment, there was a detachment of approximately 250 GRU *spetsnaz* soldiers, probably drawn from several units, including Naval Spetsnaz from the 431st Naval Reconnaissance Point. There was also a team of SOF operators from the KSSO, reportedly mainly snipers/counter-snipers and scouts.³⁴

Conducting force protection missions in an environment like Syria is as dangerous as operating in any conventional battlefield. According to Galeotti, *spetsnaz* may have already been in Damascus as a contingency in the event of a regime collapse. This seems to be the case in terms of trainers, who were there to train local military on the equipment they were being provided. For Western forces operating in an environment like Syria, this is almost always a SOF mission, but it is unclear whether the Russian trainers were SOF, *spetsnaz*, or conventional forces.³⁵

Again, one *spetsnaz* unit that was most likely there was *Zaslou*, which makes perfect sense since they are tasked not just with VIP protection and security, but also with “clean up” operations in events such as regime collapse. This is reportedly precisely what they did in Iraq immediately upon the fall of the Hussein regime, removing sensitive materials and documents that Moscow did not want to fall into US hands.

According to Galeotti, who reportedly had a conversation with a serving officer before the drawdown in Syria began, the officer pointed out that “this is the kind of war for which the *Spetsnaz* have been training for thirty years”—referring to the Soviet experiences in Afghanistan, which very much set the tone for their operations in Syria. The officer concluded by adding, “if we wanted to fight the war [in Syria], we’d be using *spetsnaz*.”³⁶ Galeotti took this to mean that there was no willingness on the part of the Kremlin to deploy SOF and *spetsnaz* in the kind of “tip of the spear” assault and interdiction missions for which they train, and is also taken to mean that Moscow had no intention of being sucked into a ground battle in Syria.

³³ Gibbons-Neff, T. (2016, March 29). How Russian special forces are shaping the fight in Syria. *Washington Post*.

³⁴ (2015, October 1). Rossiya otpravila v Siryu spetsnaz i morskikh pekhotintsev, *TSN*. <http://ru.tsn.ua/svit/rossiya-otpravila-v-siryu-specnaz-i-morskikh-pehotincev-497202.html>. Accessed 10 October 2017.

³⁵ Ramm, A. (2016, February 3). Pervie pobedy Rossiiskikh instruktorov – Chast’ I. *Voyenno Promyshlennyy Kuryer*.

³⁶ Galeotti, M. (2016, March 21). The Three Faces of Russian Spetsnaz in Syria. *War on the Rocks*. <https://warontherocks.com/2016/03/the-three-faces-of-russian-spetsnaz-in-syria/>. Accessed 13 April 2023.

Instead, the numbers of SOF and *spetsnaz* have been kept relatively low and they apparently remained focused on their ISR, training, and security missions.

The Syrian case is an interesting one, for it is the first time that Russian forces engaged in military operations outside the near abroad. Indeed, Chief of the Russian General Staff Valery Gerasimov commented on it thus in the pages of *Komsomolskaya Pravda*: other than operations in Cuba in 1962, “we practically had no experience of deploying the army and armed forces at such a distance, on the territory of a country that does not border” our own.³⁷ Indeed, during the course of the intervention, the command of 90% of divisions and over half of brigades and regiments underwent battle-testing in the deserts and cities of Syria. Moreover, the Russian military gained significant insight into US military tactics, according to a US intelligence general officer.³⁸ While perhaps not part of the initial objective, this certainly was a benefit reaped by Moscow during their operations in Syria.

According to journalist Damien Sharkov, the real reason Russia got involved in the Syrian civil war was not to support its long-time Soviet-era and post-Soviet-era ally, Bashar al-Assad, but to test its latest equipment and military hardware, as well as its commanders and officer corps.³⁹ Here Putin learned that he could become involved in conflicts far away from Russia’s borders and the West wouldn’t even protest.

9 Ukraine 2.0: Russia’s 2022 Invasion of Ukraine

As mentioned in the introduction, the launching of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022 unleashed the largest military conflict in Europe since World War II. With approximately 140,000 troops arrayed along Ukraine’s border with Russia and Belarus, encircling more than half of Ukraine’s territory, and with avenues of advance from the north (coming from Gomel), the northeast (aimed in the direction of Kharkiv), the southeast (toward Mariupol), and from the south (Russian-occupied Crimea). These forces had been moving into position since the spring of 2021, and by the time of the invasion the fighting force included numerous battalion tactical groups (BTGs), armored divisions, and artillery batteries, along with supporting logistics.

Indeed, in the weeks and months leading up to the invasion, Putin’s war machine was being put into place while the Kremlin denied any belligerent intentions, arguing right up to the days before the actual invasion that these military forces were preparing for “military exercises.” The response to US and NATO warnings that Russia was actually preparing to invade were met by the Kremlin with the response that it was Western paranoia, and by Kyiv with a response of “we have our own intel sources.”

³⁷ Sharkov, D. (2018, January 15). Russian military used Syria war to train forces and learn US combat moves, says general. *Newsweek*.

³⁸ Sharkov, D. (2018, January 15). Russian military used Syria war to train forces and learn US combat moves, says general. *Newsweek*.

³⁹ Sharkov, D. (2018, January 15). Russian military used Syria war to train forces and learn US combat moves, says general. *Newsweek*.

In the early hours of that fateful day in late February, Kyiv's and indeed much of the world's fears became reality, as Russian forces illegally and without provocation invaded Ukraine.

While many analysts—both inside and outside Russia—expected the Russian forces to crush a weak Ukrainian resistance in a matter of 36–72 h, leaked Russian war plans put the estimate at 15 days.⁴⁰ Apparently, the initial goal was to take Kyiv (or at least decapitate the regime); expand control of the Donbas out to Kharkiv in the north and to Mariupol in the south and from Crimea to Odesa, and then eventually to expand to Transdnistria in the west (the Russian-controlled break-away region of Moldova). Needless to say, things did not go according to plan.

From the US side, however, it began by doing exactly what Putin wanted it to do: the U.S. offered Ukrainian President Zelensky an emergency evacuation. This would have left a power vacuum in Kyiv and broken the military chain of command or allowed the Kremlin to install a puppet regime *à la* Crimea 2014.

10 “I Need Ammo, Not a Ride”

With these fateful words, all of Putin's plans for his “special military operation” in Ukraine went out the window. He was sure that the comedian-turned-politician would run for his life, not stand and fight the mighty Russian armed forces. Putin was gravely mistaken. Zelensky quickly transitioned from a mediocre president besieged by numerous political challenges into a war hero and international symbol of resistance to Russian aggression.

On the day of the invasion, Putin's ruse became clear, as all the world witnessed Russia's unprovoked invasion of its neighbor. It also became clear that Putin had been engaging in deception operations (or *maskirovka*) and disinformation (*dezinformatsiya*) the whole time, tactics he would employ repeatedly throughout the war. The ruse Putin conducted is known as *obman* in Russian deception operations terminology.⁴¹ The surprise (*vnezapnost'*) invasion was anything but to the outside world, but apparently even caught many of Russia's soldiers off-guard, as they believed that they were in fact preparing to engage in military exercises, not fighting fascist and neo-Nazi forces that had taken control of the country and were subjecting Ukraine's ethnic Russian population to all sorts of atrocities (*dezinformatsiya*).

⁴⁰ Musumeci, N. (2022, March 2). Ukraine revealed secret battle plans left behind by Russian troops and claimed they showed Russia planned a 15-day war. *Business Insider*. <https://www.businessinsider.com/ukraine-revealed-secret-battle-plans-left-behind-by-russian-troops-2022-3>. Accessed 23 April 2023.

⁴¹ Glantz, D. (1989). *Soviet Military Deception in the Second World War*. London: Frank Cass. See also: Bouwmeester, H. (2017). Lo and Behold: Let the Truth Be Told—Russian Deception Warfare in Crimea and Ukraine and the Return of ‘Maskirovka’ and ‘Reflexive Control Theory’. In P. Ducheine and F. Osinga (eds.). *Winning Without Killing: The Strategic and Operational Utility of Non-Kinetic Capabilities in Crises* (pp. 125–154). New York: Springer.

In launching its invasion, rather than declaring a war, the Kremlin did something quite strange at first glance (and almost completely overlooked by the Western media): it labeled its action a “Special Military Operation” (*spetsial'naya voennaya operatsiya*), or more simply a “special operation” (*spetsoperatsiya*). In fact, it was never referred to in official Russian sources or the Russian media as a “war” (*voina*) in the opening weeks of the war, and by March 4 it was even declared illegal to do so, or to be openly against the “special operation.”

11 Lies, Law, and Why Words Matter

There is great significance to the messaging Vladimir Putin and his information warfare operatives were employing in the opening phase of the “special military operation” in Ukraine. Was Putin just playing semantics, or was he trying to employ strategic messaging, and if so, what was he trying to message? There are at least a few possible explanations for Putin’s choice of wording and his insistence on its continued usage (and the outlawing of referring to the whole affair as a “war”). The first and certainly the main reason that Putin and his supporters (including Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov, Defense Minister Sergei Shoygu, and Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov) constantly employ these terms is their refusal to acknowledge that they are engaged in an act of aggression against the Ukrainian state and its people. Instead of being a war—or the invasion or attack by the armed forces of a state of the territory of another state (the United Nation’s litmus test for an armed conflict), the fighting is a “special operation” aimed at ridding Ukraine of fascists and neo-Nazis and preempting a NATO attack against Russia.

The fact that Putin and his Duma outlawed being openly against the special operation—which includes referring to it as a war—with penalties leading up to 15 years in prison, is significant. But the framing of the conflict as a “special operation” allows Russians the cognitive space to support Ukrainians while accepting the use of Russian military force. An early poll found that many Russians expressed sympathy for Ukrainians, however they believed the special operation was to help Ukraine rid itself of such malign actors as neo-Nazis. The resistance being faced in Ukraine was attributed to a small number of bad people, while others are shown on Russia’s state media channels welcoming Russian soldiers there to liberate them.

Russians polled early in the war (in the most rigorous manner possible given the situation at the time) more often than not (63% compared to less than half that number) believed the Kremlin’s propaganda or were afraid to answer truthfully (7%). As one 53-year-old village woman said to a pollster when asked if she thought the military actions in Ukraine constituted a war or were just a special military operation, “I answer you today and tomorrow the police will come and take me won’t they?”

Another 58-year-old urban male responded, "Speaking my mind on this subject is now against the law. So I'll abstain. I'd love to [answer] but I don't have a right to."⁴²

There may be another and perhaps more significant reason why the conflict cannot be referred to as a war by Russia: doing so would legitimize Ukraine's status as an independent and sovereign state. After all, wars are armed conflicts between two or more nation-states (or they are "civil wars", a term which would be even more dangerous for Putin to employ). A special operation, however, can include military operations such as counterinsurgency—when a state seeks to quell an unruly part of its territory. Thus, Putin's special military operation is not an act of aggression against a neighboring state but rather a military operation to quell a part of Russia itself—a domestic military affair and of no consequence to the outside world. This may have been the message behind the lies and the law coming out of Moscow early in the war.

The idea that Ukraine is part of Russia and not a separate country is something the Kremlin's propaganda machine has been churning out for years now. In his March 18, 2014 speech marking the annexation of Crimea, Putin declared that Russians and Ukrainians "are one people." Then in the summer of 2021 Putin published a 5000-word essay in which he went so far as to question the legitimacy of the Ukrainian state itself. He not only argued that Russians and Ukrainians are essentially one people, but Putin also stated that much of modern-day Ukraine occupies historically Russian lands, matter-of-factly stating that "Russia was robbed" of Ukraine during the Soviet collapse. Just days before the invasion of Ukraine, in a televised address to the Russian population, Putin once again stated that the very idea of Ukrainian statehood was a fiction. To solidify the lie, former president Dmitry Medvedev has taken to VK and other social media stating that Ukraine will disappear because no one "needs" Ukraine.

Such verbal attacks against the Ukrainian state are direct assaults against Ukraine's legitimacy and sovereignty—and must be taken seriously as part of Putin's larger narrative construction. As this author stated at a talk on irregular warfare held at Fort Bragg's JFK Special Warfare Center and School in December 2021, such a narrative construction would seek to frame any military operation against Ukraine as righting an historical wrong and reuniting the nation.

If Ukraine is not even an independent state, which the Kremlin has been saying for years now, the use of the term special military operation makes sense. In such a scenario, the fighting would not be an armed inter-state conflict under the guidelines of UN Charter and constrained by the Geneva Conventions, but rather a domestic counterinsurgency operation (which is considered a special operation not just by US Special Operations Command but by most militaries around the world). Thus, it is a domestic military operation, meaning that from the Kremlin's point of view, Russia has already absorbed Ukraine back in—all that remains is for that narrative to become consonant with facts on the ground. From such a perspective, Putin has been laying the cognitive groundwork for the elimination of Ukraine's independent existence

⁴² (2023, April 22). Voennaya tsenzura: Kak izmerit' strakh i kak tsenzura vliyet na rossiyan? <https://www.chronicles.report>. Accessed 21 April 2023.

for quite some time—long before Russian military forces began to assemble for “exercises” along Ukraine’s border in the summer and fall of 2021.

12 “All is According to Plan”

Nearly one month into the military operation, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov went on television in an interview with CNN’s Christiane Amanpour and said that “all was going to plan,”⁴³ which must be added to the list of the Kremlin’s flat out lies. What plan would include an armored column being bogged down for days north of Kyiv, the suffering of heavy casualties, Russian conscripts disabling themselves so they did not have to fight, and the loss of 5 general officers in only weeks of fighting (currently at 14 as of this writing)? And surely the Ukrainian nation’s stiff resistance to Russia’s special operation was not part of their war plan either.

While many outside observers agreed with Putin’s prewar assessment—that the war would be over rather quickly (while others added that the situation would rapidly transition into a resistance movement⁴⁴)—the Ukrainian state and its people (along with outside volunteers), have been doing more than fighting a battle of resistance. They have been engaged in a multi-front war against a much larger and initially better-equipped force. Their retaking of Kyiv and its surrounding region (*oblast*) looked a lot more like combined arms maneuver than a special operation. But the Ukrainians—despite an impressive and growing arsenal provided through Western security assistance—remains largely outmanned (thanks to Moscow’s mass mobilization of 300,000 soldiers—though perhaps as many as half of them fled the country rather than show up for service).

There is more to war than sheer numbers, however. There is also will—and here the Ukrainians have shown themselves to have significantly greater will than the Russian forces that invaded their homeland. Ukrainian will is something Putin grossly underestimated and is proving decisive on the battlefield. In fact, Ukrainian forces—if you follow social media—seem to even have good morale.

Putin can say that his attack on Kyiv was a feint and that his objective all along was the liberation of southeast Ukraine/the Donbas region. But his messaging tells the truth. Putin sought nothing short of the complete absorption of the Ukrainian state into the Russian Federation. Words matter, and his lies cannot cover up what his plan has been all along—a plan that has now turned into an utter and complete military fiasco for the Kremlin.

In Ukraine Putin went right to his playbook. Instead of employing special operations forces, he made the whole thing a special operation, which means it was not a

⁴³ Kremlin spokesperson on Putin’s objectives in Ukraine. (2022, March 22). <https://www.cnn.com/videos/world/2022/03/22/russia-spokesman-dmitry-peskov-russian-invasion-amanpour-vpx.cnn>. Accessed 21 April 2023.

⁴⁴ Petit, B. (2022, February 18). Can Ukrainian resistance foil a Russian victory? *War on the Rocks*. <https://warontherocks.com/2022/02/can-ukrainian-resistance-foil-a-russian-victory/>. Accessed 21 April 2023.

special operation at all. He invoked *maskirovka* and *dezinformatsiya* to degrees not seen before (how do you hide 140,000 forces and accompanying materiel? In plain sight!); he attempted to replace Ukraine's leadership with a friendly regime, only Zelensky was not willing to cooperate; he went in with overall superiority of force, as in Chechnya. Likewise, he has decimated cities and targeted population centers. He was even going to launch the invasion of Ukraine with a false flag operation, but the US called him out on it.⁴⁵ And he tested the West, gambling that all we would do is impose sanctions—and knowing that the world would not unite behind this (here I have in mind China's Xi Jinping and India's Modi).

But several things have not gone Putin's way. First, there is the high morale and will to fight of resistance forces in Ukraine. Secondly, the skill of the fighters in Ukraine, from tactics to operations. Third, the level of security assistance coming from the West. Fourth, rather than divide the West and NATO, the war has significantly united the Atlantic alliance and resulted in its further expansion. Finally, there is the performance of the Russian armed forces. At this point the VDV (Russia's airborne units) and the Wagner Group seem to be the only units capable to facing Ukrainian forces, and they are quarrelling with each other. As for Russia's mobilized forces and Wagner Group prisoner-soldiers, the city of Bakhmut has just turned into a meat-grinder for them.

13 Conclusion

Putin's first order of business after coming to power was to get his own house in order, so to speak. Once that was accomplished with the settling of the Chechen war, he turned to Russia's global strategic concerns, or grand strategy if you will. Here is where NATO expansion (not "enlargement") comes into play. Actual expansion—particularly into the Baltics and now Finland—and proposed expansion (i.e., Georgia and Ukraine) have encroached upon what Russia considers its sphere of influence. This area is perceived by Russia as its buffer zone, so that a NATO invasion would have to be played out in those countries first. The idea of prepositioning forces and materiel is a huge strategic risk for Russia, not to mention local military forces along their western flank.

Putin's wars have involved Estonia, Georgia, Syria, and Ukraine, and that is only so far. Leaked intelligence has Moldova and Belarus up at night, not to mention other suspected targets, from the Baltic republics to Central Asia. Over the past nearly quarter of a century we have witnessed an evolution of Putin's playbook, as he tried out different tactical actions, operational approaches, and strategic engagements within Russia's "near abroad," the territories of Estonia, Georgia, and Ukraine so far, but also with an eye on Kazakhstan, Moldova, and Belarus.

⁴⁵ Madhani, A., L. Cook, and S. Fraser. (2022, February 3). US says new intel shows Russia plotting false flag attack. <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-business-europe-belarus-jens-stoltenberg-43c9151532de706a2edec5684dfcf07d>. Accessed 23 April 2023.

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