

ANALYSIS ON THE ACTIONS OF UKRAINIAN SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES IN THE RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN CONFLICT (FEBRUARY 2022 – FEBRUARY 2024)

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Abstract: *This article scrutinizes the actions of the Special Operations Forces in Ukraine to derive conclusions after nearly two years of warfare, shedding light on potential shifts in tactics for both the Russian and Ukrainian armed forces in the near future. It underscores the strategies employed by Ukraine's Special Operations Forces, emphasizing engagements behind enemy lines to dismantle command structures, neutralize VIPs within the Russian military, sabotage logistics hubs, and disrupt supply chains. Additionally, it examines the organization and resistance efforts within territories temporarily occupied by the Russian Federation's Army, showcasing the pivotal role played by Ukrainian special forces in impeding Russia's utilization of strategic assets and hampering its military endeavours.*

Keywords: covert operations, special forces, Ukrainian conflict, resistance movements, guerrilla warfare

1. Introduction

The “special military operation” commenced on February 24, 2022, following Vladimir Putin's declaration of the invasion of Ukraine. Initial discussions revolved around a blitzkrieg strategy, predicated on the belief that the capture of Kyiv and the removal of President Zelensky would swiftly lead to Ukraine's capitulation, notwithstanding continued resistance efforts. The inaugural clash between Ukrainian and Russian special forces occurred in the early stages of the invasion, marked by Moscow's attempt to seize Kyiv and eliminate Ukraine's leadership.

Operating under the aegis of the Main Intelligence Directorate of the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense, special forces prioritize the neutralization of high-ranking

Russian officers. Notably, Ukraine boasts an elite unit, the Shaman Battalion, tasked with dismantling Russian infrastructure instrumental in assaults on Ukrainian soil. Throughout the conflict, there has been extensive employment of artillery and mechanized units, reminiscent of actions observed during the Second World War. Concurrently, tactics reminiscent of First World War trench warfare have surfaced, characterized by fortified positions and engineering endeavours. Furthermore, a notable feature of this conflict is the pervasive use of drone systems and precision-guided munitions by both factions, surpassing previous instances in other conflicts. Offensive manoeuvres within urban landscapes, coupled with defensive preparations and military operations to seize and hold key urban

centers, constitute additional distinctive elements of this conflict. The Russian-Ukrainian war embodies a multifaceted conflict, characterized by its highly mechanized nature, manoeuvre warfare dynamics, and the extensive utilization of artillery. Despite its classic attributes, aviation has not emerged as a decisive factor, and the efficacy of Black Sea naval forces has fallen short of expectations.

In light of these circumstances, the role of Ukrainian Special Operations Forces (UAFOS) warrants examination: are they a necessity or merely an alternative? This inquiry serves as the focal point for the authors' analysis, which draws upon open sources to delineate the operational strategies of these specialized units. Employing a range of research-scientific methodologies—including document analysis, observation, case studies, comparisons, and deduction—the authors construct a cogent and contemporary narrative. Through this methodological framework, they offer insights into the tasks and missions undertaken by UAFOS amidst the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

2. Organization and Equipment of the Special Operations Forces of Ukraine (Syly spetsialnykh operatsii – SSO - UAFOS)

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and Ukraine's declaration of independence on October 11, 1991, the Ukrainian government embarked on a reorganization of its military forces, incorporating two new components: the National Guard and Special Forces, alongside those inherited from the former USSR.

Initially founded on the framework of former GRU and KGB structures inherited from the Soviet era, Ukraine's Special Forces (Spetsnaz) were developed in response to perceived threats, both external and internal. As Russia continued to be regarded as a potential threat, Ukraine encountered challenges in its domestic political landscape, characterized by

internal instability and the proliferation of criminal organizations. Despite these hurdles, Ukraine maintained and refined its own Spetsnaz units, under the auspices of various governmental bodies including the Ministry of Defense (MOU), Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVS), and the National Guard (the latter established in 1991). Additionally, the Alpha Group remained under the purview of the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU).

In December 2015, the Ukrainian Special Operations Command (SOCOM) was established, overseeing four army special operations regiments, three Navy special operations regiments, and two training centres. With an approximate strength of 2,000 personnel, SOCOM aspires to bolster its ranks to 4,000 members. Since its inception, SOCOM has prioritized the modernization of its forces, aligning equipment and practices with NATO's Special Operations Forces standards. Ukrainian special forces now benefit from training programs, advanced military hardware (including helicopters, patrol and attack boats, 4x4 vehicles, Bayraktar TB2 drones, etc.), and Western weaponry such as automatic firearms, rocket launchers, and anti-tank systems.

In response to setbacks encountered during the conflict in Donbas, the Ukrainian Armed Forces undertook a series of reforms. On January 5, 2016, Ukraine's special forces were consolidated under a single, independent military branch known as the Special Operations Forces (UAFOS), headquartered in Kiev. Consequently, UAFOS emerged as one of the seven branches of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, alongside the Land Forces, Air Force, Navy, Air Assault Force, Marine Corps (Marines), and Territorial Defense Forces. The organization of the Ukrainian Special Forces in peacetime and garrisons was as follows: [2]

Special Forces Command, (Kyiv);

- 99th Staff and Support Battalion (Berdychiv, Zhytomyr region);

- 142nd Training Center, (Berdychiv, Zhytomyr region);
- 3rd Special Purpose Regiment, (Kropyvnytskyi, Kirovograd region);
- 8th Special Purpose Regiment, (Khmelnysky, Khmelnytsky Oblast);
- 140th Special Purpose Center, (Khmelnysky, Khmelnytsky Oblast);
- 73rd Naval Special Purpose Center, (Pervomaisky Island, Mykolaiv region);
- 16th Informational-Psychological Operations Center, (Huiva, Zhytomyr region);
- 72nd Informational-Psychological Operations Center, (Brovary, Kiev region);
- 74th Informational-Psychological Operations Center (Lviv);
- 83rd Informational-Psychological Operations Center (Odessa).

On 24 June 2019, the 140th Special Operations Centre based in Khmelnytsky was certified as a special operations unit that can be involved in the NATO Response Force (NRF), making it the first unit from a non-NATO state to obtain this qualification. [3] It is noteworthy that the unit was created with the support of NATO member states. [4]

Ukraine's Security Service — the country's main intelligence agency and law enforcement authority — has its own special forces unit: the Alpha Group, which played a pivotal role in defending Kyiv.

The Ukrainian Navy SEAL, the 73rd Naval Special Operations Center, was based on the 17th Naval Special Purpose Brigade, which existed during the Soviet era. Created as a training facility, it became known for its small boat raids and reconnaissance missions carried out behind Russian lines along the Dnieper. The Ukrainian unit – part of the Naval Infantry (Marines) – operates on roughly the same structure as SBS forces in England or, even better, as the US Navy SEAL Team, US Navy special forces, recognized for high-risk missions, which include counterterrorism raids, freeing hostages, capturing, or eliminating important targets,

reconnaissance or intelligence gathering missions behind enemy lines, etc.

UASOF are equipped with the best equipment available, starting with combat attire, ballistic protection equipment, underwater equipment, communication technology, day and night observation equipment. [5] It also has access to a wide range of vehicles and other land, naval and air operational means of transport (high mobility multipurpose wheeled vehicles, small patrol boats, Zodiac-style small boats, helicopters, and fixed-wing aircraft).

Russian and Ukrainian commandos have a common provenance: Spetsnaz units within the GRU, the military security services of the USSR. They had something else in common until Kyiv received advanced weapons after several countries came to Ukraine's aid following the Russian invasion: weapons.

The armament owned by UASOF is a combination of Soviet, domestic and Western armament and consists of: semi-automatic pistols, assault rifles, sniper rifles, light and heavy machine guns, grenade launchers, guided anti-tank missiles, portable air defense systems, defensive and offensive grenades.

While many details surrounding the initial days of the invasion remain obscured, it is known that units from Ukraine's Special Operations Forces (SOF) were deployed to defend the capital. Conversely, reports suggest that at least one unit dispatched by Russia potentially included members from the enigmatic “Zaslon” unit, which had been clandestinely embedded within Kyiv prior to the invasion.

Throughout the conflict, special units from both sides played an active role, albeit with markedly different approaches and strategies.

3. UAFOS Missions during the Conflict

Since its reorganization, the Ukrainian Special Operations Forces (UAFOS) have been actively engaged in numerous battles and special operations, both at the front lines and behind enemy territory. Evolving

into a seasoned military entity, UAFOS has demonstrated prowess in various operations since the conflict's inception. However, the intricate details of these missions are shrouded in secrecy, designated as state secrets, including information regarding the operatives comprising this elite structure. Nonetheless, select operations have been publicly disclosed, with some extending beyond the front lines into Russian-occupied territories and even Russia itself, sparking speculation regarding special forces involvement.

Modeled after Western special forces, UAFOS operates within constrained numbers, executing missions that are more targeted and conventional compared to their Russian counterparts. Notably, they have conducted operations behind enemy lines to neutralize key targets and galvanize resistance movements within occupied territories.

The demonstrated capability of UAFOS underscores their status as the most proficient Ukrainian forces, adept at engaging in attrition battles with the Russian military. Equipped with a repertoire of direct action and guerrilla warfare tactics, they confront a numerically superior adversary with strategic finesse.

Throughout the conflict, UAFOS has executed high-risk missions encompassing direct actions, sabotage endeavours, and drone strikes targeting fuel depots, power infrastructure, railway networks, and military installations. Additionally, they have undertaken assassinations targeting high-value individuals and collaborators, both within Crimea and occupied regions, as well as in Russian border regions adjacent to Ukraine. While numerous examples exist, only those disseminated by international media outlets are acknowledged herein.

a. Direct Actions by UAFOS to Defend Kiev

During the onset of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russian occupiers launched an attempt to seize Hostomel Airport, located

near Kiev. Recognized as a strategic target by Russian forces, Hostomel Airport faced a concerted assault in the early days of the invasion. Approximately 34 helicopters and up to 300 Russian soldiers, hailing from the 31st Desant-Assault Brigade and the 45th Guards Spetsnaz Brigade, spearheaded the attack, managing to secure the airfield following nearly two hours of intense combat. However, their hold on the airport remained tenuous due to a dearth of air support.

A decisive counterattack, orchestrated by the 3rd Special Purpose Regiment in conjunction with Ukrainian air assault units, altered the course of the engagement. It is our contention that the successful occupation of the airport by Russian forces would have precipitated the seizure of the capital and, by extension, fundamentally altered the trajectory of the conflict.

b. Direct Actions by UAFOS to Destroy Logistical Supply Convoys of Russian Invasion Forces

In the early days of the invasion, Russia's operational planning and poor military performance allowed UASOF to take initiative and freedom of action. Eloquent was the nearly 60km blockage that resulted when Russian logistical forces from separate tactical units were able to move only on arranged communication routes leading to Kyiv, due to the weather phenomenon "Rasputitsa" that occurred in February 2022.

Small UASOF subunits (usually 4 to 6 operators), armed with anti-tank weapons and supported by drones, organized convoy ambushes using simple tactics. One team hit the vehicle from the front, another team hit the vehicle from behind. The rest of the convoy was either unable to manoeuvre or had difficulty manoeuvring, becoming an easy target for the other UASOF teams. [7] Although in the first months of the conflict, UASOF were not used for specific operations, but to replace ordinary infantry in actions considered essential. As

manoeuvre units were trained and deployed on the front line, which began to become more stable, UASOF was used to execute basic missions: executing reconnaissance missions in the enemy's device, executing raids and sabotage on ammunition and fuel depots as well as organizing resistance combat.

c. Direct Actions and Operational Raids behind Enemy Lines

Ukrainian Special Operations Forces (SOF) operators conducted reconnaissance missions deep within enemy territory to gather intelligence on Russian units, equipment, and command posts. Leveraging their linguistic proficiency and specialized training, SOF operatives seamlessly infiltrated local communities, enabling them to operate clandestinely behind enemy lines and acquire crucial intelligence regarding enemy capabilities and vulnerabilities. These skills proved instrumental in executing precision strikes against Russian command and control structures preceding the Ukrainian counteroffensives in the Kharkiv and Kherson regions in September and October 2023, respectively.

In August 2023, a UAFOS detachment penetrated over 600 kilometres into Russian territory, launching an assault on the Soltsy base in Novgorod and successfully destroying one Russian Tupolev TU-22M3 bomber while incapacitating two others. Tragically, during their return to Ukrainian lines, the military fell into an ambush orchestrated by Russian forces. In the ensuing battle, Colonel Oleg Babii, commander of the unit responsible for neutralizing the three Russian bombers, lost his life.

d. Specific Actions for Organizing Resistance in Occupied Territories

A cornerstone mission of UAFOS is the organization and execution of resistance operations in territories temporarily occupied by enemy forces. Aligned with the

National Resistance Strategy, UAFOS played a pivotal role in mobilizing and assisting civilians who remained behind to participate in both armed and nonviolent resistance activities within occupied areas. Covert cells were established to orchestrate targeted attacks on Russian officials, members of the imposed administration, and collaborators collaborating with the occupiers.

These operations not only degraded the enemy's operational capabilities but also sowed fear and instability well beyond the front lines, undermining enemy morale. UAFOS benefitted from the ability to recruit human assets within Russia and occupied territories, access to Western military satellite intelligence, advanced electronic warfare and cyber capabilities, and a diverse fleet of modern drones capable of conducting operations that Russian forces struggle to detect, target, or counter.

Additionally, the relative lack of training among Russian troops in safeguarding key objectives, coupled with the unwavering determination of UAFOS operators to defend their homeland under extreme risk conditions, further contributed to their effectiveness in organizing resistance efforts.

e. Specific Actions in the Landing Mission on Snake Island

On the night of July 7, 2022, elite operatives from the 73rd Special Operations Forces (SOF) Naval Centre of Ukraine conducted a daring operation to approach Snake Island utilizing underwater vehicles. Divers meticulously scoured the coastal perimeter, meticulously searching for mines to ensure a safe approach. Upon establishing a secure navigation corridor, they signalled for the continuation of the mission. Notably, the 73rd SOF Naval Centre serves as the specialized unit of the Marine Infantry of Ukraine, often colloquially referred to as "Spetsnaz," drawing comparisons to counterparts like

the US Navy SEALs or British Special Boat Service (SBS).

The SOF operators were not alone in this endeavour; they were accompanied by engineers from the 59th Motorized Infantry Brigade, who were tasked with the initial clearance of mines or other potential hazards laid by Russian forces. Subsequently, SOF operators followed suit, unfurling several Ukrainian flags as they set foot on the island and commencing their mission to gather intelligence on any abandoned Russian equipment. Ukrainian reports indicate that amidst a hurried retreat, Russian forces left behind a Pantsir-S1 air defense system and a P-18 radar on the island.

4. Conclusions

Special operations serve as pivotal elements within the context of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, with the utilization of UAFOS concepts continuing to hold an integrative character. These concepts offer multifaceted solutions for the evolution and action of all categories of Ukrainian forces, considering advancements in the laws and principles of armed conflict, as well as interoperability with other military structures within the Ukrainian army and allied forces.

Analysis of the military, geographical, diplomatic, and social aspects specific to the conflict reveals various scenarios in which UAFOS can be effectively deployed. These include rapid and short-term strikes against Russian forces, neutralization of key enemy leadership and communication nodes, destruction of strategic targets, capture of high-value political and military figures, elimination of terrorist elements, and disruption of enemy logistics and infrastructure. Moreover, UAFOS operations are instrumental in creating a sustained state of insecurity and fear among adversaries, while also executing psychological warfare actions and safeguarding critical objectives for a limited duration.

A noteworthy distinction emerges in the utilization of special operations forces between Ukraine and Russia. While Ukrainian commandos demonstrate proficiency in wreaking havoc behind enemy lines, Russian forces often integrate their special operations units into ground assaults alongside inadequately trained infantry.

Both Ukrainian and Russian commando units share their roots in the Soviet Union. Known as Spetsnaz, which historically referred to the Soviet Union's Spetsnaz GRU, the units formed the covert operations branch of military intelligence and other security services before the breakup of the Union. And I understand the vital importance of proper mission planning. The navy's commandos are part of Ukraine's Special Operations Forces (SOF), which play a key role in the conflict with Russia.

The influx of Western weapons into Ukraine's military — particularly over the past two years, while Russia has retained its Soviet-era weaponry — has caused their equipment to diverge. Videos of Ukraine's forces on the battlefield showed them using drones (either to drop ammunition or guide missiles to their targets) and weapons like the handheld Javelin rocket launcher to destroy high-value targets. Other footage from the battlefield in Bakhmut showed Ukrainian snipers using thermal imagery to eliminate Russian troops determined to take the city. In the case of Russia, many of the units classified by Moscow as "special forces" are often defined only by their superior equipment (and in some cases not even that).

Differences between how Ukraine operates and that of Russian special forces have also emerged throughout the ongoing conflict. Ukraine's highly trained elite units — modelled after Western special forces such as the British SAS — are limited in number and have therefore been deployed in a more conventional and precise way. They were seen working behind enemy lines to disrupt

Russia's war efforts, destroy key targets, and organize resistance movements in occupied territories.

Another crucial difference is their ability to take initiative on the battlefield, spread during gruelling months of training

alongside special forces from the United States, Poland or Lithuania. By executing specific missions and results achieved so far, UAFOS has demonstrated that it is a professional structure that Ukraine can be proud of.

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