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# Inside Spetsnaz: Soviet Special Operations, A Critical Analysis

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Understanding how this is possible is an essential lesson that must be learned by all segments of the national security community.

*Perestroika and Soviet National Security* is a compelling and extremely important book. It is informative, easy to read, and offers the impression of participating in a fascinating conversation. Whether one is attempting to understand the complexities of the economic or military restructuring implicit in *perestroika*, or merely trying to put recent Soviet actions into perspective, Mike McGwire has provided a ready tool. More importantly, he has posed a most important question for the makers of U.S. foreign policy: If the political decisions that formed the basis of our defense policies for the last forty years were based on fundamental misunderstandings, how can we be certain that in the post-Cold War world we are making the right decisions?

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Burgess, William H., ed. *Inside Spetsnaz: Soviet Special Operations, A Critical Analysis*. Novato, Calif.: Presidio, 1990. 308pp. \$24.95

As the cold War ends, finally there arrives a book on Soviet special forces that is not based on rumor and speculation. Grounded in solid historical research, this collection of fourteen essays by scholars, intelligence analysts, active duty army

officers, and a civilian "anti-terrorist consultant" definitely lives up to its reputation as the "most definitive work on Soviet special operations currently available."

*Inside Spetsnaz* analyzes all the known campaigns of troops of "*spetsialnogo naznacheniya*" (special designation), including operations in the Spanish Civil War, the Petsamo-Kirkenes (Murmansk) and Manchurian battles of the "Great Patriotic War" (World War II), Czechoslovakia in 1968, and Afghanistan. This is no breathless exhortation on the Soviet special forces threat. Quite the contrary, the theme is that spetsnaz units are not "ten feet tall." The editor has characterized recent articles on spetsnaz as the promotion of a "Great Spetsnaz Scare of the 1980s . . . a Cold War misadventure cut from the same cloth as the Bomber Gap and the Missile Gap." The authors of these essays treat spetsnaz forces as but one small facet of the overall Soviet military apparatus: important, but not very effective in historical terms.

The Soviets themselves refer to their elite fighting units with a bewildering array of descriptive titles: "special designation," "special reconnaissance," "diversionary reconnaissance," and "special groups." More confusion arises in that spetsnaz-like units appear to be attached to the K.G.B.—ostensibly a "civilian" intelligence organization—as well as military intelligence (G.R.U.) and regular military and naval commands. One virtue of the book is the development of a coherent definition as to

which units actually constitute "spetsnaz." The editor boldly offers six plausible criteria for identifying a Soviet military unit as spetsnaz: "(1) a specialized mission, e.g., ground reconnaissance to operational depths in the enemy rear, (2) a unique organization and/or unusual equipment, (3) high political reliability, (4) extraordinary selections and training, (5) unusually high level subordination, and (6) utility at all levels of conflict and war." No one has better solved the identification problem.

Historically, Soviet reconnaissance and sabotage forces are naval oriented—raising comparisons between spetsnaz and the U.S. Navy Seals. Two chapters are devoted to an explanation of this comparison, in which the World War II defense of Soviet naval bases in the Murmansk area by spetsnaz units was directly under the commander of the Northern Fleet, Fleet Admiral Golovko. He, of all the wartime Soviet commanders, displayed the greatest personal interest in the development of spetsnaz units, and the Murmansk campaign may be their greatest individual success. In contrast, spetsnaz activity in Czechoslovakia or Afghanistan, while dramatic and undoubtedly ruthless, was of less military significance. This use of spetsnaz to defend the Soviet northern flank (and to counterattack), and the means and methods of infiltrating and extracting them, appear to hold valuable lessons for any future northern maritime campaign.

The importance of the spetsnaz naval predisposition is underscored by recent reports that the Soviets have attempted to bend the provisions of the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) treaty by redesignating certain army units as "naval infantry." Naval infantry is not covered by treaty restrictions, and, presumably neither are naval spetsnaz units—even if their functions and specialties parallel that of their G.R.U. and K.G.B. counterparts. If such redesignation were permitted, we might find that all spetsnaz became "naval" in orientation thanks to "arms control."

However, William Burgess offers compelling logic in his portrayal of the "spetsnaz threat" as only a fragment of the massive military apparatus that, despite perestroika, remains the primary threat to permanent peace in Europe. After all, if Nato could not win the central front tank battle (if such a battle ever took place), its inability to detect and disarm special reconnaissance forces operating in the rear would be academic.

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Friedman, George and Le Bard, Meredith. *The Coming War with Japan*. New York: St. Martin's, 1991. 429pp. \$24.50

The authors ask, who in 1900 would have predicted the cataclysmic turmoil that occurred by 1920 as a result of World War I? They also point out that if anyone in 1980 had predicted