



*Changing Character of War Centre  
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**Book Review by Henry Plater-Zyberk  
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**Elite Warriors: Special Operations Forces from Around the World, Edited  
by Ruslan Pukhov and Christopher Marsh  
East View Press Minneapolis. 2017. 263pp. ISBN: 978-187994499-2**

The first serious books about modern Special Forces (SF) began to appear with the growth of terrorist attacks. None of the European countries were prepared for the waves of terrorism which began in the 1970s. Some countries had SF units in their Armed Forces but they had very limited anti-terrorist capabilities and because they usually were subordinated to Ministries of Defence (MOD), there was relatively little interest in them. For example, the first serious book about the British SAS was published only in 1981 and Viktor Suvorov (Vladimir Rezun), a GRU defector, made the world aware of the Soviet “Spetsnaz” only in the mid-1980s.

With terrorism becoming a worldwide threat, the UK quietly and efficiently readjusted its Special Forces. The German anti-terrorist unit, the Border Protection Group 9 (GSG 9), was established only in 1973, after the massacre of the Israeli athletes in the Munich Olympic village in 1972. The French National Gendarmerie Intervention Group (GIGN) and the Soviet “Alfa” antiterrorist units were set up the following year, also as a reaction to the Munich massacre. The Italian Special Intervention Group (GIS) appeared in 1978.

The trickle of titles about SF, which started in the 1980s turned into flood several years later. Today, democracies and democracies-to-be in the unspecified future are usually proud of their SF units to acknowledge their existence and to show publically some of their skills is a very good recruitment trick and an attempt to shows that the state cares about the security of its citizens, irrespective whether that is true or not. This is why today there is no shortage of books and even TV documentaries on Special Forces mainly in the developed countries.

“Elite Warriors” is an unusual book. It is a product of a respected Russian think-tank, Centre for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies (CAST), and published in English in the US. The book’s authors cover 14

countries: Russia, Ukraine, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Iran, Israel, Jordan Turkey, China Singapore, Columbia and Algeria.

The two chapters about Russia are very informative and cover all recent reforms. The second chapter deals mainly with Russia's Special operation forces (SSO) a relatively new organ within the Ministry of Defence. The editors decided that the book will not include anything about the "Alfa" and "Vympel", anti-terrorist units subordinate to the Federal Security Service FSB or about the most secretive of them all, "Zaslon", the SF unit of the Intelligence Service (SVR).

The chapter on the Ukrainian SF describes mainly those units belonging to the MOD, though the author mention also the special units controlled by the Ukrainian National Guard of the Ministry of Interior and the Security Service of Ukraine. He does not mention their problems though evidence of such is reported in the Ukrainian media. All units of the Ukrainian Ministry of Interior begin to look like components of an alternative ground force rather than law and order units.

The description of the French Special Operation forces is precise and comprehensive but misses a paragraph or two on the anti-terrorist units of the French Gendarmerie (GIGN) and that of the National Police (RAID). The authors of the German, Italian and Polish chapters covered every possible angle of their subjects as did the author of the chapter describing the Israeli SF community. All four chapters are informative and concise.

The coverage of the SF communities of other countries rarely mentioned in the Western media is also very good although the author of the chapter on the Iranian SF, for example, is disadvantaged by a paucity of Iranian sources and the limitations of what they offer. Nevertheless, the information squeezed from these limited sources available is very interesting. Iran has, in reality, two armies the other being the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) a smaller, more agile parallel organisation which is better funded than the armed forces, and with all necessary means to protect the regime and to operate abroad. The IRGC, in addition to its own special units and the intelligence gathering body, has the Quds Force which gathers intelligence and conducts operations abroad. This chapter also has an interesting section on the Iranian SF forces fighting record.

The chapter on the Turkish SF community is one of the strongest points of the book: the only piece authored by two scholars, it is also the longest, including discussion of the July 2016 coup. But it would have been even better if the authors had added more information about the relentless legal and administrative war conducted for several years by Erdogan against the Turkish armed forces prior to the failed coup.

The Jordanian Armed Forces are the most "Westernised" in the Arab world, partly because the time-tested British military system was not entirely abandoned by King Hussein and partly due to his son, King Abdullah II, who modernised the Jordanian Special Operation Command with the help of US specialists. English language publications provide therefore a lot of information about the Jordanian SF units. The author was able to provide us with an excellent multidimensional picture of the Jordanian SF community.

The task facing the author was of the chapter on the Algerian SF was much more difficult. Algeria is at best semi-dysfunctional, semi-democracy, and unnecessary secretive about its armed forces. The author, relying mainly on French sources is, therefore, able to provide only basic information about Algerian SF structures and activities, but does offer an excellent historical background for some older and more recent historical events in which Algerian SF took part.

The author of the chapter describing the Chinese SF faced a less formidable wall of the state secrecy but relying mainly on the Chinese language sources, was able to produce a short but excellent chapter. Obsessive secrecy is not something the author of the chapter on Singapore's Special Operations Task Force had to face. Singapore with its surprisingly large contingent of citizens under arms has the most technologically advanced defence forces in the region. They are also well organised, trained and tested. This is an interesting and well written contribution to the book.

Columbia has a population larger than that of Ukraine, and it had been facing powerful and well-armed radical guerrilla forces for decades. The Columbian government was able, with the help of US SF, to weaken its opponents such that they were gradually forced to negotiate a peace deal. This well documented and informative chapter is too short. The author is unquestionably an expert in his field but the interesting bibliography at the end of the chapter suggests that much more could have been written about the Columbian SF.

"Elite Warriors" is an interesting and important book. It is probably the best overview of the non- Anglo-Saxon SF forces in any language. Even though the authors faced very different levels of difficulties to find credible resources, every chapter is of a high standard.

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