

What Has Become of the GRU, Russia's Military Intelligence Agency?

To understand the Czech arms depot explosion, you have to delve into the history books.

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April 21, 2021



Dalibor Gluck / CTK / TASS

Two striking facts from a Czech investigation into the GRU's role in the 2014 explosions of ammunition depots in the village of Vrbetice shed light on how the GRU has developed over the years.

First, investigators learned that GRU agents organized the two explosions — that claimed human lives on the territory of a European country. This was part of an operation to poison Bulgarian arms dealer Emilian Gebrev, thereby disrupting the supply of weapons to Ukraine. Second, it turned out that the same two GRU operatives who had attempted to poison Sergei Skripal in the United Kingdom personally arranged the explosions.

In fact, the roots of this operation go back to September 28, 1956, when a bomb exploded in the Hamburg office of Otto Schlüter.

Although the prominent arms dealer escaped with nothing more than wounds, his assistant was killed. Two more attempts on Schlüter's life soon followed.

One year later, a bomb exploded in his Mercedes-Benz, killing his mother and seriously wounding his daughter. Only at that point did Schlüter decide to give up his main business, which had been supplying weapons to Algerian rebels of the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN). Because other Germans were also supplying weapons to the FLN, the assassination attempts continued. Soon after, a bomb planted under the driver's seat of a different Mercedes-Benz in Hamburg exploded, killing another arms dealer.

That man's Swiss business partner had been killed earlier in Geneva by a poisoned dart fired from a converted bicycle pump.

Meanwhile, the cargo ship *Atlas*, loaded with Norwegian dynamite for the FLN, sank in the port of Hamburg after a bomb attached to its keel exploded.

It was a high-profile story, and the series of murders and bombings were attributed to the mysterious la Main Rouge (The Red Hand) organization that was believed to be a group of French settlers in North Africa who were dissatisfied with the course of the war in Algeria.

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It later became known that professional units of the French intelligence service SDECE had carried out the operations.

By that time, the SDECE had developed two types of operations to prevent outside parties from supplying weapons to Algeria. The first was called "Arma," from the word armaments. These operations were intended to sabotage the FLN's support channels and intimidate businessmen working with the Algerians.

This involved destroying the ships carrying weapons there, such as the *Atlas* in the Hamburg port. The second, code-named "Homo" for "homicide," involved the assassination of arms suppliers and FLN agents. The operations killed hundreds of people, primarily in North Africa and the Middle East, with German arms sellers among them.

The killings in Germany had a specific purpose — to knock Germany out of the small arms supplies market for the Algerian rebels. Many years later, Germany acknowledged that terrorist activities by the "The Red Hand" was one of the reasons that forced the German authorities to tighten the rules on the arms trade. This did not, however, help the French win the war in Algeria.

This old story — that the French and Germans dislike recalling — is very similar to how the Czechs describe the current actions of Russia's GRU. In it, we see the same combination of "arma" and "homo": explosions at arms depots and an attempt to poison a Bulgarian who supplied arms to Ukraine.

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Thus, the GRU has adopted the tactics that French special services used more than 50 years ago — but with one important addition: they use the same individuals to carry out subversive activity in peacetime Western Europe and to eliminate traitors to the Russian state.

The explanation for this also comes from the 1950s.

While the French were blowing up German arms dealers, a GRU officer in neighboring Austria, Ivan Shchelokov — a war veteran and son of a saboteur who had blown up bridges in Spain — carried out a number of similar assignments with his wife.

“Nadezhda and I worked as a couple, as did four other pairs of young secret service agents like us,” he said. “We kept in touch with the station staff, but our main task was to eliminate traitors. The work was difficult and dangerous. After one year, of the five couples carrying out these missions, only Nadia and I remained.”

Shchelokov later recalled that all such “liquidations” followed the same pattern: “We usually arranged to meet the victim near a body of water so that they would immediately ‘swim with the fishes,’ as they say. Nadia always shot them with her Groza, a silent pistol.

At the rendezvous point, she would take a folded piece of paper from her purse and hand it to the traitor. While he was unfolding it, Nadezhda would shoot him straight from her purse. I would keep watch and then tie stones to his feet and drown him,” he said.

Shchelokov never questioned his role in these murders. He only regretted that one of his victims was not, in fact, a traitor, and that the order to cancel the mission did not reach him in time. He was also angry at the unprofessionalism of his superiors, who did a poor job of planning the escape routes for him and his wife. He apparently had no other qualms or misgivings about this part of his life.

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After returning to the Soviet Union, Shchelokov continued his career in military intelligence. He was soon tasked with helping to create what became the notorious GRU Special Forces. Today, he is considered one of its founding fathers.

The objectives of the GRU Special Forces have changed over the years: operations in Afghanistan and local conflicts in the 1990s turned them into units brought in for subversive activities and ambushes, all very far from the world of intelligence officers in cushy foreign postings.

However, this has not made it difficult for the GRU to continue finding new recruits for its Special Forces.

In the post-WWII Soviet Union of Joseph Stalin, GRU service led saboteurs and assassins like Shchelokov to a career in the Special Forces, whereas in the Russia of Vladimir Putin, Special Forces agents such as Anatoliy Chepiga — who was implicated in the Skripal poisoning case

— move from desk jobs in the Main Directorate to working as assassins and saboteurs in the field.

And just like their predecessors, today's operatives refrain from asking unnecessary questions about the nature of their work, even if they sometimes complain about their superiors' poor planning.

Thus, the GRU has come full circle. Despite moving into ultra-modern headquarters replete with a helipad, the GRU remains staffed by people who view the world through a 1950s lens and indulge a Stalinist appetite for liquidating traitors.

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