

Widening scope: The return of the Russian sniper

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Russia's use of snipers fell away after the Second World War, but conflicts in Syria and Ukraine have seen them return, engaging their opposite numbers, co-ordinating air strikes, and enhancing the firepower and effectiveness of regular units. *Samuel Cranny-Evans* reports

Tales of Russian snipers operating in the ruins of Stalingrad during the Second World War have gained a mythic quality. Vasily Zaitsev, for example, is credited with more than 225 kills during the Battle of Stalingrad and a final tally for the war that exceeded 300, while several less celebrated Soviet snipers achieved tallies during the conflict that reached between 400 and 500 kills. Even so, the end of the war marked the retreat of the Russian sniper and a shift towards area suppression with assault rifles.



A Russian soldier looking through the scope of an SVD sniper rifle on the outskirts of Syria's eastern city of Deir Ezzor on 15 September 2017 during a press tour. Suppressors and night-vision equipment have given Russian forces a decisive edge over militants in Syria. (Dominique Derda/AFP/Getty Images)

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However, during the latter stages of the First Chechen War in 1996 the Russian Ground Forces returned to using dedicated snipers and now the Russian sniper is again becoming responsible for mythical tales of valour and marksmanship. This is combined with a renewed Russian doctrine that foresees circumstances where snipers can alter the military balance on an entire battlefield and secure tactical victories over much larger forces.

Equipment

At the start of Russia's campaign in Chechnya in 1994 Russian forces relied on marksmen equipped with the SVD 7.62x54 mm R self-loading rifle fitted with a PSO-1 optical sight. According to *Jane's Infantry Weapons*, the PSO-1 offers the user a magnification of x4 and the ability to sight targets at 1,100 m. It also includes a reserve iron sight for close-range engagements and the NSPU-3 night sight for accurate night sighting at 1,000 m.

The rifle is fed by a 10-round magazine, sacrificing the accuracy of boltaction rifles for a high rate of fire. Modernised versions of the SVD are fitted with a folding shoulder stock, bipod, and optional suppressor. The maximum effective range of the rifle is 800 m, making it better suited to marksmanship duties in an infantry section over true sniper operations, according to Lester Grau and Charles Cutshaw in their 2002 paper *Russian Snipers in the Mountains and Cities of Chechnya*.

The SVD remains the primary tool for marksmen within the Russian Ground Forces and special operations forces. It is a lightweight weapon at 4.7 kg, can be easily transported, and has enough accuracy to engage targets beyond the reach of an infantry section's assault weapons. Furthermore, its high rate of fire enables Russian snipers to engage groups of targets, which is a common requirement in urban warfare.

One Russian sniper, a veteran of many unofficial Russian operations, told *Jane's* in 2000, "The SVD is a fine and very accurate weapon. I was able to extensively and successfully use the Dragunov in Afghanistan. It worked okay ... but to do an accurate and quiet job I would rather have a bolt-action rifle." The SVD also lacks the penetration power needed to defeat targets wearing modern body armour or the range needed to defeat unsuspecting targets without exposing the user.

This gap was partially met by the SV-98: a bolt-action rifled chambered for the 7.62x54 mm R cartridge that uses the 7N14 sniper round, also referred to as the 7H1. The rifle was released in 1998 and modernised in 2016 to include a folding stock. It can be fitted with a bipod and suppressor as standard.

It is issued with the 1P69 3-10x42 variable-magnification optical day sight, while the 1PN113x3.7 fixed magnification sight is used as the standard night-vision sight. The 1PN113 uses Gen 2+ and Gen 3 tubes to amplify natural light and can identify an infantryman at 500 m, according to Rosoboronexport. By day the maximum effective range of the SV-98 is 1,000 m. Despite this increased range over the SVD, the SV-98 still lacks the range and lethality of many rifles used by Western snipers.

To address this Russia exploited good relations with the West during the early 2000s and imported examples of the Accuracy International Arctic Warfare Magnum (AWM) sniper rifle and Steyr SSG 08, according to the *Russian New Generation Warfare Handbook* issued by the US Army's Asymmetric Warfare Group in 2016. Both rifles are chambered for the .338 Lapua Magnum round, which can engage targets at distances well beyond 1,000 m. The 16.2 g bullet is still supersonic at 1,400 m and retains more than 1,000 J of energy at that distance, according to *Jane's Infantry Weapons* . This makes the weapon well suited to long-range engagements and true sniper-led operations.

Russia has taken the .338 calibre round and developed it into the T-5000 rifle from ORSIS, which has been accepted into service with Russia's Federal Security Service, Federal Protective Service and Rosgvardia (National Guard of the Russian Federation). The rifles are bolt action, magazine fed, and designed to provide sub-minute of angle (MOA) accuracy.

Using the .338 Lapua Magnum round, or 8.69x69 mm STs-8 as the calibre is referred to by the Novosibirsk Cartridge Plant, the T-5000 has an effective range of 1,500 m. A standard round can penetrate 8 mm of mild steel at a range of 100 m, but the armour-piercing variant can penetrate 20 mm of armour at the same range, according to the *Jane's Ammunition Handbook* . Such capabilities enable Russian snipers to engage personnel wearing body armour, making snipers more effective through both the T-5000's longer range and improved lethality compared to the SVD and the SV-98.

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