

## CHAPTER NINE

### Bodyguard Training in the Russian Federation

Without doubt, Iraq and Afghanistan have permanently altered the attention private security and bodyguarding has had in the media, changing forever the perception the general public has of the industry. Before the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, the public generally knew very little about bodyguarding and private security; to most people it was a twilight world, populated by thugs, gangsters and mercenaries, which they knew nothing about. However, since the US declared the end of major combat operations in Iraq in May 2003 and restructuring of the country commenced, and fuelled by recent kidnappings and assassinations – of both bodyguards and their clients – the bodyguarding industry now receives almost daily media attention and is the subject of frequent articles and editorial, as well as a fair number of top-quality television programmes. Also, with the introduction of SIA licensing in the UK, compulsory standardised training and strict vetting, bodyguarding as a career is now open to almost anyone with the aptitude and ability, the drive and the determination, and the right background. As an industry, bodyguarding has gone from strength to strength; it is no longer the sole domain of a select number of ex-Special Forces earning £500 plus per day, bonded by secrecy, mystery and silence. Bodyguarding is now big business, with corporate takeovers and multimillion-pound contracts.

But this has only been the case in some western countries over the past few years. Prior to 2003, there were only a handful of other nations, at peace, that had such a high-profile private security industry. One such country was the Russian Federation – although many would argue that with the ongoing conflict in Chechnya, Dagestan and Ingushetia, and the occasional terrorist activity in Russia's capital, the country has never really been at peace.

Since the fall of communism, private security in Russia has grown significantly and is now a multibillion-pound industry. During the years of communism, there were no private security companies, only special military units

set up and funded by the government for specific and specialised purposes. Because there was little or no crime and everything was owned by the state, there was no real need to protect anything, as there was no obvious threat. And those very few petty criminals who did exist were generally quickly caught and sent off to the Gulags of Siberia, where they usually ended their days building roads on a diet of dried bread.

During communist rule, it was the government who were the criminals, and they controlled everything anyway. But once communism fell, it was a free-for-all, and by fuck did you have to protect what you had. Without protection, a business – any business – would have had no chance whatsoever of surviving. Even a small corner shop had to have armed guards standing at the entrance, nervously eyeing up all and sundry.

I fondly remember the very first Russian nightclub I visited on one of my very first trips to Moscow. I was in the country meeting the directors of a company called Centurion VI, at that time a major player in the private security industry. I was planning a forthcoming security operation with a banker who I had been tasked to protect. After a hearty meal at a restaurant that they said they owned on the outskirts of the city, I was invited on to a nightclub with a couple of the bodyguards whom I was going to be working with. Having already sampled the delights of Russian women, I eagerly agreed, hoping that I could at least see some wondrous female forms – even if I was in Russia on business and therefore couldn't touch . . .well, shag.

The nightclub was behind the now demolished Intourist hotel at the bottom of Tverskaya Street, a few minutes' walk from the Red Square. As we approached the club, two menacing-looking doormen stood guard outside, each brandishing AK-47s. I am not easily intimidated, but even I drew a deep breath at nightclub doormen with AK-47s and asked myself why were we not allowed to work the doors with these kind of tools back in the UK – now can you imagine what that would be like!

The doormen obviously knew the people I was with, and we were quickly recognised and received a warm, enthusiastic welcome. I just smiled and nodded

eagerly, not understanding a word and hoping to God that they were really being kind and welcoming and not planning to decapitate me and sell my remains for a few roubles to feed the poor beggars found on every street corner. This was one sad thing that I immediately noticed in the newly capitalist regime – there were beggars everywhere.

I spent the rest of that evening huddled in a smoky corner with four slightly insane-looking, chain-smoking, vodka-swilling, pissed Russian bodyguards, who thought it was terribly funny to un-holster their weapons, swirl them around their fingers, gunslinger style, while shouting ‘cowboy’ at the top of their voices and pointing them at the other extremely scared customers. Needless to say, by the end of the evening we were the only ones left in the club, apart from a bevy of the most gorgeous girls, who were either dancing in front of us or cuddled up around with their tits hanging out and tight shorts up their arses. They were all so beautiful and were obviously paid to stay late and entertain us – but I never saw one rouble pass hands that evening, so I have no idea who paid for what, or if in fact anything was paid for. That was Moscow in the early 1990s.

Moscow is undoubtedly addictive; anyone who has been will almost certainly agree. At first, you enter the country with trepidation and apprehension – after all, Moscow *is* Moscow: corrupt and criminal, crazy and callous – but you then have to be dragged screaming back to the airport a few days, or weeks, or months, or years, later. To this day, I still believe that there is nowhere like it in the world, but back then when everything was new and exciting, when you could do anything and there was little or no accountability, Moscow was simply fantastic.

Shortly after joining the Worldwide Federation of Bodyguards as an international trainer, we decided to set up and run a training course in Moscow. After a few years of coming and going, I had developed quite an extensive network of unique contacts within the security industry. If you wanted armed bodyguards with machine guns, I could do it. If you wanted to blue-light it down the middle of major highways, I could do that for you too. If you wanted someone to disappear, no doubt that could also be arranged. Killed someone and got

caught with the still-smoking gun in your hands? No worries. In fact, in societies like those, almost anything could be done for a fee – nothing was impossible.

Centurion VI employed mainly Russian ex-Special Forces personnel. As a Russian Special Force soldier, when you left the army there weren't that many options available – you normally went into bodyguarding or you joined the criminal fraternity as an assassin or extortionist, earning twice the money. Paradoxically, ex-Special Forces soldiers were often protecting clients against ex-Special Forces assassins.

During my visits on contract to Moscow, I had got to know some of the bodyguards quite well, and when I mentioned that the WFB wanted to run a close protection training course in Moscow, they jumped at the chance. The WFB – now disbanded – was growing rapidly, and its reputation was developing. I asked the ex-KGB director of Centurion if he knew a facility or base where we could run the first course. He grinned knowingly – he knew of a very good base which we could use, no problem. On my next visit to Moscow, all would be arranged.

Returning to England after even the shortest of trips to Russia was never easy. I went from running a bodyguarding operation or involving myself in a corporate and usually very interesting investigation to working back on the doors – it was the only job I could do that allowed me the time off to go to Moscow. That was one of the good things about the doors: I would just need to telephone the security company and tell them that so and so weekend or week I would not be available to work, and they would always quickly find a replacement. This was before SIA licensing, so doormen were relatively easy to find. I didn't mind working the doors, and it helped pay the bills, but I always yearned to get back to Moscow.

My next trip couldn't come fast enough, and about two months later I was on the plane back to Russia with the sole intention of finding a training camp and setting up a WFB close protection training course. I only had four or five days – it was all the money the WFB had to finance the trip – and a lot to do. I had to look for a suitable training camp, arrange a date, negotiate fees, find instructors, fit the Russian style of training into the WFB's western style of security operations, find

accommodation for the students, arrange transportation and slide myself gracefully into the knickers of at least a couple of gorgeous Russian girls – a requirement on every trip.

I made my own way from the airport to the Ukraine Hotel, a Russian hotel boasting four stars, but this meant *maybe* two stars by western standards. I was on a tight budget, so instead of being robbed blind by the taxi drivers that hound passengers as they exit Sheremetyevo International Airport, I decided to join the hordes of Russians and take a minibus.

Unlike most other international airports worldwide, there are no trains or decent coaches from Sheremetyevo into Moscow. If you don't have a car waiting for you, you either have to pay the equivalent of at least £50 for a taxi, or squeeze onto a minibus with 12 or so other passengers for about 50p! Travelling in a minibus is definitely not for the faint-hearted. There is no room for luggage, so you sit with your bags on your lap, there is no heating, the bus is crammed and to pay you pass your money down the line of passengers to the driver while he negotiates the traffic and your change and screams back at the one poor soul who hasn't paid yet – how on earth he knows how many people are on the bus and who has or has not paid, I don't know.

The airport is about 30 minutes drive to the outskirts of Moscow, where the minibuses stop – you then have to get a metro to your final destination. Faced with this daunting and occasionally scary journey, most westerners on a corporate budget happily pay the taxi fare, but I was different – I wasn't on a big budget, and anyway I despised the smelly, corrupt, soliciting taxi drivers and the Mafia gangs behind them that take most of the money the drivers 'steal' from the foreigners.

The Ukraine Hotel is a colossal Stalinist building that sits on the west bank of the Moskva River at the far end of the glitzy, neon-dotted Novy Arbat street and directly opposite the Russian government's White House. It is ironic that during the cold war both the US and Russian governments had headquarters named the 'White House' – although it was the Americans who built theirs first, the Russian version not being completed until 1965. One of the 'Seven Sisters'

that dot the Moscow landscape, the Ukraine Hotel was built in the 1950s to demonstrate the expertise and glory of the Soviet regime. With more than 1,000 rooms over 30 storeys, the hotel is not particularly comfortable but reasonably priced compared to other western hotels – although it is not particularly cheap, either. Although things are slowly changing, it is big problem that there are no reasonably priced, decent western-style hotels in Moscow. You can either stay in a Russian-style hotel for £30 to £40 a night, but with terrible service and the phone ringing consistently with strangely accented girls offering you a little extra comfort for a few extra dollars, or in a first-class western hotel costing at least £150 to £200 a night! There is little choice in between.

Wrapped in a warm woolly scarf and thick coat, with my *shapka* (furry Russian hat) pulled tightly down over my ears, I stood on the steps of the hotel the following morning waiting for my lift. It was cold, about minus ten, and snowing heavily. Winter in Moscow is tough. It decimated the Germans during the Second World War, and before that Napoleon's army, and today it still kills many people, especially beggars, who are frequently found frozen to death in derelict buildings or huddled in doorways in the grimy backstreets far away from the splendour that is central Moscow. Unlike the west, where people on the streets tend to be alcoholics, drug addicts or the mentally ill, beggars in Russia are the old, the poor, the disabled – 'normal' people simply unable to cope.

As I watched huddled figures racing in and out of the hotel foyer, a black BMW glided into the parking area. 'Good to see you, my friend,' said Alex, jumping out of the back of the car with his outstretched hand. I had met Alex on my first-ever job with Centurion and over time had got to know him quite well. Alex had been Gorbachev's own personal bodyguard for much of his presidency and joined the Presidential Protection Team after serving as an officer in Alpha Unit – Russia's equivalent to the SAS. Alex never spoke much about his experiences in the military or by Gorbachev's side; in fact, he never spoke much at all. He was a hard, imposing-looking man with cold eyes that you just knew had witnessed some wild and probably not particularly nice things. A few years later, I was to learn that Alex had left Moscow to settle in a warm, quiet country

somewhere in the Mediterranean. I was told that he *had* to leave, as he knew too much about what went on within the higher echelons of the corrupt and frequently brutal Russian government.

‘Where are we going?’ I asked.

‘You will see. We have found a very good base for your training. Yes, very good.’ He seemed pleased with himself. I really hoped that the camp was going to be OK, as we already had about seven or eight students lined up for training back in the UK, all trying to thrust their deposits into my hand. Training in Russia was definitely going to be a unique, once-in-a-lifetime experience, and we felt sure that we could find at least ten students for the first course, probably a lot more. However, I had so little time in Moscow, finding something else during that visit would have been impossible and funding other trips extremely difficult.

We drove for about two hours, first through the centre of the city towards the outer ring road, and then north-east through the suburbs, past the miles and miles of bleak, sombre-looking high-rise apartment blocks. The city turned into country, and the country turned into remoteness, and we turned off down a snow-covered track between walls of thick pine trees. The place was barren and desolate except for deep tracks in the snow, where heavy tank-like vehicles had recently passed.

Then, all of a sudden, the pine forest ended, turning, it seemed, into a huge dark-green metal wall, topped with layer upon layer of barbed wire that stretched as far as the eye could see. We continued down the track with the wall on one side of us and the snow-covered pine forest on the other. After a few minutes, the car slowed and turned into a recess in the wall that had been virtually impossible to see from the road. A soldier popped his head out of a steamy cabin, looked at us, inspected the car and without even emerging from the warmth of his sanctuary pressed a buzzer, at which point large metal gates slid open sideways, allowing us to drive into the army barracks.

‘This is where I trained,’ Alex said to me proudly. ‘This is Alpha Unit’s training base. It will suite you very well for your training, no?’

I was gobsmacked. How the fuck was a non-military foreigner allowed onto a Russian Special Forces training camp? As we drove towards what looked like the offices, we passed a few soldiers darting here and there, a tank, an armoured personnel carrier, and two of the most menacing-looking gate guards holding sub-machine guns that I have ever seen in my entire life. They were obviously extremely pissed off at having to patrol the front-gate area in sub-zero temperatures, and if looks could have killed, I would have been long dead.

As we parked and got out of the car, a man dressed in winter fatigues emerged from the barracks to greet us. His name was Ivan Medvedev, and he was the commander of the base. Behind him were two more menacing-looking soldiers, who stood to attention and kept a close eye on me as we were all introduced. Ivan was friendly and smiled, while the soldiers looked as though they were going to tear me to pieces. Who on earth would think about messing with the Russian Special Forces?

After going into the office and sipping strong, black, sweet tea, Ivan proudly showed me around a few of the buildings on the base. We first went to the kennels. I didn't know that the Russian Special Forces kept dogs, but they did, mainly to guard the base, but they also had a small special team to search buildings. I was introduced to Svetlana, the woman who ran the kennels, and she looked as butch and dog-like as the animals she was looking after. We then walked to the barracks where the soldiers lived. It was really basic, more like a prison than an army barracks, again confirming my initial impression that the Russian Army are a hard bunch of fuckers – you *have* to be hard to live in the conditions they lived in. Paint was peeling off the walls, the rendering was falling away, the heating and hot water, I was told, was sporadic at best. Surprisingly, though, each soldier had a small private room with bed, bedside table, wardrobe and chair. There was also a small communal area in every dormitory with tea, coffee, etc., and there was a larger communal area in the main building. There was also a rusty, antiquated gym and shower block, but it was all extremely basic.

As we wandered around, I noticed that there were only a handful of soldiers lounging around. Most, we were told, were either off base training in Chechnya or 'in your country killing spies'. Ivan laughed heartily and slapped me on the back when he said this. He was joking, right?

The main building was as basic as the dormitories, with lecture rooms, a communal area populated by worn-out, frayed chairs, an antiquated old television and little else. I couldn't imagine spending years of my life living in these conditions. It was too cold to spend long outside, so we wandered over to the indoor firing range, where the soldiers who had silently accompanied us demonstrated various fire and movement techniques with their old Russian-made Makarovs. Apparently, the Russian military and police officially stopped using these weapons in 1991 when communism collapsed but many were still kept and used for training, as they were extremely simple to operate and very reliable.

One of the unsmiling soldiers then handed me a Stechkin pistol and asked me to have a go. It was a while since I had handled a weapon, and for a few seconds I must have looked a real arse, staring at the weapon as though it was a pretty pink bow. The soldier nodded to me knowingly, and I nodded back in terror – what if I fucking missed the target completely? They stood and stared as I chambered the first round and, like a complete arse, missed the target completely! I fired off another eight rounds, double click to each target, and managed to at least hit something, although certainly not anywhere near the centre of the target, as I think everyone around me was expecting. If Alex was wondering to himself what the fuck was I doing as a close protection operative, he didn't show it; instead, he covered my embarrassment with a gruff, 'You fucking English with your fucking stupid gun laws – you really must practise a bit more!' He then turned to Ivan and said something in incomprehensible Russian, which even made the soldiers break a slight smile.

We then returned to the small office and drank some more tea, which an elderly Russian lady made and poured for us. Ivan talked to Alex, who translated. 'You can have this base and train here about four times a year, maximum. When you want to do training, you give a month's notice, and he,' Alex gestured

towards Ivan, who smiled, 'will send everyone, apart from the gate guards, who will not say anything, off the base somewhere – maybe to Chechnya!' He laughed. 'You will give Ivan \$2,000 each time you train, OK?'

'OK,' I immediately agreed. This was incredible. I was going to pay the camp commander of the Russian Special Forces \$2,000 a week to use his camp for WFB training. This could only happen in Russia – everything is for sale, even an army military base. Alex later told me that \$2,000 was more than the camp commander earned in one year! As we arranged the dates of our very first training course in the Russian Federation, I thought briefly about the poor soldiers who were to be sent off the base, no doubt to somewhere horrible while we used their rooms and facilities and lined the commander's pockets.

Back at the hotel, I called the WFB and told them the good news: we had a base, we had weapons, we had accommodation and food, and we had instructors. It was a recipe for a very successful course.

Two months later, ten students arrived at Sheremetyevo Airport. All of them were originally from a military background: five were English, one was French, two were from Iceland, one was from Denmark and one came all the way from the USA. I had arrived a few days earlier to set everything up. I ordered a minibus, employed a translator, sorted out accommodation and paid the camp commander in advance, which I am sure made our stay even better. He was like a child with a new toy, the toy being our group of naive westerners coming into his play area.

The students were all undoubtedly hard men. The Dane and a couple of the Brits had served in Bosnia, the American was a former marine, and the Icelanders . . . well, they were Icelanders. However, nothing could have prepared them for the week ahead. Their jaws dropped in unison when the metal gates slid open and the minibus drove into the compound. They almost died with fright when they saw their living conditions and shit themselves when they were introduced to the two soldiers who were to be their instructors (alongside Alex and me). All of them wanted to turn around and go home within a few minutes of arriving, but none did, and the week was probably one of the best I have ever

spent training. It was incredible, and the conditions paled into insignificance compared to the quality of the instructors and the knowledge and skill they showed.

Every evening, after an extremely tough day's training, we sat together eating and drinking vodka. The food they served was basic but plentiful and the vodka cheap but endless.

After the last day's training, we headed off into Moscow city centre and spent the evening at the Swedish-owned Night Flight on Tverskaya Street – one of the most exclusive whorehouses in the city. The team had been shocked when they had first arrived in Moscow, and I wanted to shock them – albeit in a very different way – on their last day, too. We all got pissed on expensive drinks, stared up at the knickerless podium dancers and flirted with the hugely expensive but most incredibly beautiful whores in Russia. It was a fitting end to a tough week . . .

### **Bouncers and Bodyguards**

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