

As War Rages in Ukraine, U.S. Military Studies Russian Weapons at a 'Petting Zoo'

Sharon Weinberger - The Wall Street Journal

NELLIS AIR FORCE BASE, Nevada—A 20-minute drive from the Las Vegas Strip is a repository for some of the most coveted secrets of the Cold War, accumulated over the years from forgotten battles, arms dealers and foreign governments hungry for hard cash.



Maria Alejandra Cardona for Wall Street Journal As War Rages in Ukraine, U.S. Military Studies Russian Weapons at a 'Petting Zoo'

The Threat Training Facility on Nellis Air Force Base houses the collection of Soviet weapons, many lying idle in the desert heat. It offers visitors a close-up look at the MiG-29 jet fighter, once one of the Soviet Union's most feared aircraft because of its air-to-air combat capabilities.

Visitors can also crawl into an SA-13, a mobile Soviet surface-to-air missile system that menaced Western aircraft in the first Gulf War. And then there's the Mi-24 Hind, an attack helicopter the Soviets used extensively in their war in Afghanistan, where it became a target of CIA-supplied Stinger missiles.

In Pentagon parlance, these prized samples from the Soviet arsenal allow for "foreign material exploitation," or studying another country's weapons. The collection has earned a more cuddly moniker from curious visitors: "the petting zoo." Now, this quasi-graveyard of aging weaponry is getting another moment in the sun as a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. While most of the petting zoo's weaponry is decades old, the war in Ukraine, in which both sides are often using aging Soviet arms, serves as a reminder for why the collection exists in the first place.

The exact origins of some of the equipment is still shrouded in Cold War mystery of spies, gun runners and defectors. Some of the pieces were captured in war, like the

Mi-24 Hind. U.S. forces scooped up the Russian-built attack helicopter from the defeated Iraqi military in the first Gulf War.

“We don’t like to say war trophy,” said Lt. Col Brian Redstone, the commander of the Air Force’s 547th Intelligence Squadron, which operates the facility. He preferred to call it an “acquisition to help educate and train our war fighters.”

Lt. Col. Redstone, who was in second grade when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, said the military needs to make sure it doesn’t forget what it learned fighting against Russian weapons in the past, particularly when some of the same arms are being used in the Ukraine conflict.

“This allows us to make sure that we don’t do that,” he said.

The reasons for collecting the equipment go back to the Vietnam War, when U.S. jet fighters suffered mounting losses against Soviet-built aircraft. To help better understand those losses, the U.S. secretly acquired Soviet aircraft and then flew them in Nevada as part of a classified test squadron known as the Red Eagles.

After the Soviet Union collapsed and the Red Eagles were disbanded, the Air Force decided to lift the veil of secrecy over at least some of its foreign weaponry. In 1993, the Air Force declassified the Threat Training Facility, and opened it to the public in 1996.

“We spent quite an amount of time training and working on that equipment, so we didn’t want to just throw it in a junkyard,” Lt. Col. Redstone said.

Since the 1990s, the intelligence squadron has used the equipment to help develop tactics and procedures for members of the U.S. military who may end up fighting in wars against the weapons. The exhibits at the facility allow visitors to experience the look and feel of real Soviet weapons, which is how it became dubbed the “petting zoo.”

“I don’t like that term, quite honestly,” Lt. Col. Redstone said. “It reinforces the narrative that it’s a museum, that there’s no training value. But there absolutely is training value to me.”

The advantage of having the physical weapons available is the ability to demonstrate some of the problems an enemy might face on the battlefield, said Maj. James Livsey, the squadron’s director of operations.

He pointed to the cramped interior of an SA-13. “It is hot. It is tight. It is bumpy,” Maj. Livsey said. “It’s not an overall pleasant experience, but it’s good to realize the human factors that go into this.”

Another lesson that can be gleaned from the petting zoo is why so many countries, including Ukraine, still use these weapons. While some governments have opted for the equipment because of historical ties to the Soviet Union, the weapons can be easier to use and maintain than those produced by the U.S.

The war has spurred Ukraine—which was part of the Soviet Union until its dissolution—and Western allies to acquire even more Soviet weaponry for Kyiv’s military, such as aircraft and air defense systems.

A former American military official who had worked for several decades with Russian weapons said he was approached in March about trying to recondition some of the 547th Intelligence Squadron’s Soviet aircraft for potential use in Ukraine.

The former military official said he was asked if he could “make the petting zoo’s aircraft flyable?” He said he couldn’t. “There’s fuselage damage to the ones that I am familiar with that make them unserviceable,” he said.

That wouldn’t be the only example of the U.S. military trying to resurrect its inventory of Soviet weapons. The U.S. military and intelligence community still own some Russian weapons that remain classified, according to those familiar with the foreign material exploitation program.

The Pentagon was planning to send some of its Soviet air defense systems to Ukraine, including an SA-8, The Wall Street Journal has reported. The Pentagon hasn’t publicly disclosed what was sent, but a defense official said: “Parts of Soviet-era missile defense systems stored by the U.S. in Alabama have been delivered to Ukraine.”

The Air Force’s 547th Intelligence Squadron has an SA-8 at the petting zoo, but isn’t sending it, or any of its other weapons, to Ukraine. By all accounts, the equipment there is in poor shape. The aircraft can’t fly; the tanks can’t fire; and only two pieces in the collection can move on their own.

One former defense contractor, who previously worked with the U.S. military’s collection of foreign equipment, was skeptical that any of the U.S.-owned Soviet air defense systems could make it to the battlefield. “We have systems that can limp along,” he said.

“They may or may not make it to the transporter, and they may or may not work for more than a couple hours.”

Even if the equipment is old, the petting zoo still provides a critical service for the military, the former American military official said. The collection allows American troops to see what Russian equipment looks like in real life before they potentially encounter it on the battlefield.

Modern aircraft may have radar systems that can look down and identify a potential target, but it is still important, the former official said, for members of the military to recognize by sight a foreign aircraft.

“Sometimes your look-down, shoot-down equipment is not quite as accurate as a set of eyeballs,” he said.