The History and Variety of Russian Martial Arts From Ancient Times to the Present

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Introduction

Martial arts practitioners of modern times have access to an unprecedented variety of arts and styles. Global travel has dispersed martial arts knowledge all over the world. The video tape and the internet allow us to learn new techniques, while modern safety equipment such as mats, pads, and groin protection, allows us to practice these techniques safely. Japan gives us judo and karate, from Korea come taekwondo and hapkido, wing chun is from China, capoeira is from Brazil, krav maga is from Israel; the list is, of course, long. The martial arts world of today is truly globalized—each country and culture has something to contribute.

Russian styles of martial arts are not the most popular in America today. Perhaps this is because they are not as old and well-established as the more popular Eastern and Western arts. But it is clear that those who have come into contact with some of the Russian martial arts are convinced that they are extremely effective and educational. This paper reviews the history and variety of Russian combat styles, and describes in detail the three styles that are most popular today: sambo, systema, and ROSS.

History of Russian Martial Arts

Martial arts develop in periods of war and conflict. Throughout history Russia had to fight and repel invaders from the east, west, south, and north. Attackers brought their own distinct styles of combat and weaponry. Battles took place in different conditions: from sweltering summer heat to freezing winter cold. Russians were very often outnumbered by enemy forces. As a result, there are many very different styles of combat that were developed and practiced in Russia, and around it, in the former Soviet republics.

Pre-Christian Era

There are no easily accessible written materials about the fighting methods of ancient Russia, though several schools claim to be based on such knowledge. We do know that martial arts skills developed in the form of competitive games held during holidays and celebrations.[1] These skills were passed on from father to son and comprised tribal rites of passage from childhood to adulthood. In "Novgorod's Stories" there are references to *kulachniy boi*, fisticuffs, or fist-fights, with use of throws and strikes, often there were also weapons such as clubs, flails, and even knives.[2] A common weapon used in Novgorod's fisticuffs was the *dubinka*—a straight wooden club, more than one meter in length. There are less credible references, buried deep in folklore and legends, to even more ancient combat styles. One of them is *sobor*, created in the eighth century B.C. in the Russian city of Radegor, which existed somewhere between modern St. Petersburg and Viborg.[3] Modern-day sobor

practitioners use a combination of strikes, blocks, throws, chokes, and weapons, although it is not known how much this martial art really resembles the ancient one, practiced before the arrival of Christianity. Another fighting style that claims very ancient origins is *buza*, practiced around the old Russian city of Tver. It borrows its name from the slavic pagan rite of passage, where *utamani* from neighboring villages fought for dominance over the regional sacred place.[4] The fundamental principle of modern-day buza is the absence of rigid techniques, instead there are certain general principles that teach the body to find natural ways of defense and attack. The body is relaxed and fluid—the term *drunk* is used—and movements are functional and economical. The attacker is controlled by turning his energy against him, by leaving the danger zone and letting him run into a *podstavka*, a jamming strike or throw.

Medieval Times

With the arrival of the Russian Orthodox Church, these pagan fighting syles and rituals were outlawed. There are references to fisticuffs in church meeting resolutions that condemned such fights and those who participated in them. However Slavic people were increasingly under attack from the western and northern peoples; during the thirteenth century, for example, it is estimated that the people of Novgorod fought the Lithuanians fourteen times, the Teutonic Knights eleven times, the Swedes twenty-six times, and the Norwegians five times, as well as periodically battling the forces of other Russian cities.[5] This near-constant threat of war demanded the creation of both

organized and flexible martial tactics. Weapons were developing rapidly during this period. Warriors adopted the use of *kolchuga*, a chain metal shirt for body armor, *mech*, a long straight sword, *shlem*, a conical iron helmet with a sharp tip at the top and a nose guard, and *schit*, a long, almond-shaped shield. Other common weapons were lances, flails, bows, and axes. The core of the army was formed by the *druzhina*, a highly-trained, well-equipped cavalry. This could be enlarged by citizen militia recruited from able males in the city. Successful battles and wars show that Russian warriors of the early thirteenth century were a match for surrounding powers both in tactics and in equipment.[6]

That changed with the Mongol invasion of 1237–38. In one-to-one combat, a Mongol and a Russian warrior would have been evenly matched, but as a fighting force, the Mongols were both tactically and strategically superior. Their level of organization was far above that of the feuding Russian princes. The Mongols destroyed the cities of north-eastern Russia, but, weakened by the fight, did not venture further west. Many historians believe that it is the bravery of the Russian warriors that saved Western Europe from being overrun by the Mongolian Golden Horde. Russia was occupied by the Mongols for four centuries, but the Russians were quick to learn from their conquerors. Part of the Mongol tax was a draft of the Russians to fight in the Horde, they went to fight in the Caucasus, China, and Egypt. It is during this period that the Cossack *shashka*, a special cavalry saber, and the *nagaika*, a lethal lead-filled short whip, were introduced into the arsenal of the Russian fighting arts.[7]

Renaissance and Beyond

The first written details of martial arts combat in Russia are given by the Austrian ambassador Sigismund von Herberstein in the middle of sixteenth century. He writes:

> Youth and teenagers gather on holidays at a well-known spacious place, so that everyone can hear and see them. The accepted signal for the gathering is a whistle. Having heard this whistle, they immediately run and start fighting: at first it is a fist-fight, but soon, with great fury, they start striking and kicking to the face, neck, chest, stomach, groin. They try to win by any means, so that often they are carried away with no signs of life. The one who defeats more people, stays for the longest time, and can bear the most strikes, is considered the winner. The purpose of such competitions is to teach the young men to bear strikes and pain."[8]

These fights have no rules, and strikes are used even when the opponent is knocked down to the ground. There is no doubt that such fighting requires strength, endurance, and bravery, but probably not much skill. The best fighter is the one who can fight longest and take the most punishment. Von Herberstein's advice for European fighters, who want to try and win such a fight, was to defend at the beginning, waiting for the first furious attack to subside, and then use superior technique and the Russians' lack of defensive techniques to defeat them.

More detailed descriptions of fights, written by Russians, appear in the eighteenth century. The amount of technique is still questionable, and the rules (or lack thereof) stimulated brutality. A popular Russian saying, "don't hit a laying man", first appears

as part of a police order from 1726. Apparently most Russian fisticuffs fighters considered this to be an infringement of their true rights, and it was a long time before this rule started to be observed in any sort of consistent fashion. Strikes were made with the closed fist as a punch, but also with the bottom of the fist as a hammer, and the side of the fist. There were kicks to the legs and very limited leg hooks and reaps, which were considered to be extremely fancy techniques. Fighters often used concealed knives, flails, and short clubs; as an opponent was only able to safely defend himself if he had a similar weapon, openhanded defense against such weapons was considered almost impossible. The natural conclusion is that at that time, Russian fighters had no effective and reliable weapon-defenses. As before, the most important attributes of a fighter were strength and endurance.

This was also the case in the Russian army. There was no systematic teaching of hand-to-hand combat methods, as it was much easier to teach a soldier how to fire a pistol. A notable exception to this philosophy was made by Alexander Vasilyevich Suvorov (1729–1800), one of the best-known Russian military commanders in history. Suvorov introduced innovative offensive tactics, emphasizing detailed soldier training, especially development of physical stamina, and rapid maneuvers. He advocated close-quarters, violent combat, and introduced the saying "The bullet is a fool, the bayonet is a fine fellow".[9] His successes on the battlefield are testament to the effectiveness of his tactics, and his strategy remained a model for the Russian army well into the second half of twentieth century.

Nineteenth Century Developments

In the nineteenth century, a variety of martial styles entered Russia: wrestling, fencing, boxing, and even jujitsu. Greco-Roman wrestling was particularly popular, especially the circus version that was done for show. It is still practiced today, although it is not nearly as widespread. The participants can only use arms, working against the opponent's upper body with an established set of techniques. The goal is to take the opponent down and to pin his shoulder blades to the mat—this is considered clean victory. Greco-Roman wrestling is more a ritual sport than a martial art, since rules constrain the nature of attacks and a clean victory is awarded for attainment of a specified position (pinned shoulder blades), rather than submission or knock-out.[10]

Russian Martial Arts of the 20th Century

The October Revolution of 1917 brought a major shift in the evolution of Russian combat systems. In 1918, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin created *Vseobuch*, the organization responsible for training the Red Army. Lenin's aide, Joseph Stalin, ordered a high-ranking official, Voroshilov, to organize research into combat methods, and adopt them to be used by the army. It was a vast endeavor, never before had there been such an awesome pursuit for information on combat, and never since has there been a state-sanctioned mandate to create a sovereign martial system to be used by its military organizations. The information from this investigation was to be controlled by the State. This is the origin of what later became a deliberate, State-authorized distortion and falsification of technical

details of soviet combat. Voroshilov was ordered to establish a secret, hierarchical structure to the information. At the highest, most secret level, a close-quarters combat system was to be devised for use by the special forces and the secret police of the Soviet Union. The goal of this system was silent killing by elite forces and torture methodologies by the secret police. At the second tier, the information was to be taught to the *militsiya*, the soviet police. The purpose was crowd control and immobilization via joint manipulation, pressure points and strikes. Finally, at the third level, the information was to be intentionally diluted into a basis for competition and for training of the general military. This "sports" system had to be deliberately designed for information seepage into other countries, to be believable it had to appear effective and revolutionary, yet the most effective combat techniques had to be removed. It is with these goals that *sambo* was created.

History and Development of Sambo

Sambo stands for *SAMozashita Bez Oruzhiya*, self-defense without weapons. It is considered to have three forefathers: Vasilii Sergeevich Oschepkov, Victor Afanasievich Spiridonov, and Anatolii Arcadievich Kharlampiev.[11] Oschepkov was born in 1892 on the Japanese-controlled island of Sahalin. He studied judo at the Kodokan Institute only twenty-five years after it was created. At that time training was cruel and pitiless, and it was not long after the Russia-Japan war, so Oschepkov's opponents were ruthless. But soon he became a tough opponent even for the experienced judoka. Official Kodokan files indicate that Oschepkov

registered on 29 October 1911, received his first dan on 15 June 1913, and obtained his second dan on 4 October 1917.[12] He was the first Russian, and among only four Europeans, to receive a black belt from the Kodokan Institute at that time. Having returned to Russia, Oschepkov became a pioneer of judo. The first international judo competition, in 1914, took place not in New York, Paris, or London, but in Vladivostok. An article from *Dalyokaya Okraina*, a Vladivostok newspaper, describes a

> "competition between students, who came with their instructor Hideteshi Tomabeshi from the commercial college of the city of Otaru in Japan, and students from the local club 'Sport', organized by the head of this club V. S. Oschepkov, who also personally participated. There were many spectators. Some self-defense techniques were demonstrated by Mr. Oschepkov, who was attacked not only from the front, but also from the back."[13]

In 1921, Oschepkov became a commander in the Red Army. He traveled to China and Japan, secretly gathering information about combat arts. Returning back to Russia, he started demonstrating his knowledge. The December 1929 issue of the soviet journal *Fizkul'tura I Sport* describes a new two-month course in "ju-do—the way to adroitness, a previously unknown Japanese art of self-defense". The article also included description of the course curriculum: "1) throws, joint locks, strikes with arms and legs, and chokes; 2) self-defense techniques for an unarmed man against an opponent armed with a rifle, gun, saber, knife, or some other weapon of close-range combat; 3) techniques of combat against two unarmed

men." The instructor was Oschepkov. The techniques were taught not only to men, but also to women.

Oschepkov taught Japanese judo only at the beginning. He knew judo very well and understood its great success, but he also saw its serious shortcomings. He did not intend to be limited to the things he was taught in Japan, instead he tried to create a new effective system of applied wrestling and self-defense. He was absolutely free in his work, without any contacts with foreign judo schools or canonical Japanese judo. His approach was entirely scientific, with constant review of principles and techniques, collecting the best that many international and national styles of wrestling and self-defense had to offer. Without hesitation, he threw away the "antique treasures" of judo and resolutely introduced new, more effective techniques. Oschepkov realized the importance of strikes and kicks in hand-to-hand combat, his guiding principle became "strike, technique, strike". He understood that good kicking and kick-defense experience can only be obtained through sparring, which was dangerous. So he constructed padding for legs and protective armor for the body. Practice was conducted on soft wrestling mats, tight jackets and sport shorts were used instead of the traditional gi, and students wore special light shoes. Soft mats not only allowed safe throws, and thus fewer injuries, but also helped develop advanced ground-fighting methods as fights continued after a fall or throw.

Oschepkov's teaching methods were radically different from those of the Japanese. He rejected simple teaching of techniques, insisting that good self-defense skill can only be taught with wide

participation in sport-sparring, which, even though limited by safety considerations, trains such essential skills as distancing, quick orientation and reaction in a stressful situation. At the time, the Japanese instructors denied the necessity of the usual physical training exercises and ignored them, Oschepkov, on the other hand, knew of the recent achievements of Russian, European and American physical education science, and incorporated these findings in his classes. He wrote:

> "…our task is to understand how to teach ju-do, methodically and hygienically, and at a much higher level than is done by, for example, the Germans, who have established this system as a popular sport in recent years… Our methods for studying ju-do are different not only from the Germans', but also from those of the Kodokan Institute…even now the Kodokan Institute has no general physical training drills…it is impossible to develop the body's abilities without special physical exercises".[14]

Perhaps most important in the development of this new Russian martial style was the creation of new technical, and hence tactical, arsenal. Oschepkov was not content with simply studying martial arts for the sake of self-improvement; he considered it "necessary in strengthening the defense of our country". He included leg-locks, absent in judo. He analyzed all the wrestling styles and martial arts familiar to him from the combat viewpoint. He incorporated strikes from Chinese wushu, English and French boxing, and wrestling techniques from many different styles: Greco-Roman, American free-style, Swiss wrestling, Caucasian wrestling, and middle-asian wrestling. To

expose himself and his students to these styles, he organized competitions, inviting wrestling practitioners to publicly compete with his students. Judo became simply one of the many components from which the new Russian combat style was being built. It is particularly interesting to note the influence of various ethnic wrestling styles from the peoples around the Soviet Union. These included Georgian *chidaoba*, Azerbaijanian *gulesh*, Uzbek *kurash*, and Kazakh *kures*. Their techniques and rules are very similar to one another, all presumably developing out of the Greco-Roman style. In sparring under these rules, a fight is finished once one of the opponents touches the ground with something other than his foot, for example a knee. Arm-locks, chokes, strikes, or kicks are not allowed, and the opponents are not allowed to grab below the waist.

The result of Oschepkov's amalgamation of styles was very effective. Three decades later, in the 1960s, Donn Draeger, a seventh dan judoka, wrote:

> "Judo is the past for sambo. They learned judo very quickly. I don't want to get into details, but you should know that sambo students with four to six months of training could successfully fight with fourth-dan judoka (note that they [the sambists] were restricted by judo rules, unknown to them). Their distinct feature, noted by judo practitioners during the first fights with the sambo wrestlers, was exceptional balance against throws in all directions, their phenomenal balance… They are masters of joint locks, from any position, even while standing up… Sambo take-downs often render the judoka helpless with their strength and effectiveness".[15]

Victor Spiridonov and Combat Sambo

While Oschepkov was developing his effective new style of wrestling, another man, Victor Afanasievich Spiridonov, was also working on creating a new system. Spiridonov fought in the Russian army during the Russia-Japan war of 1904–05. After the war, he studied Japanese jujitsu. During World War I he was injured, and subsequently retired, starting work in the field of physical development of soldiers, and developing a new system of self-defense, that he called *samoz*, short for *samozashita*, self-defense. Spiridonov had envisioned integrating all the world's fighting systems into one comprehensive style that could adapt to any threat. This was the first incarnation of Russian combat sambo. Samoz was a worst-case scenario fighting system, drawing mainly from jujitsu, Greco-Roman wrestling, American catch-wrestling, British boxing, and Dutch silat. Weapons use was an integral part of samoz. During the 1920s samoz became popular and widespread among the USSR policemen and border-guards. This was also an effective system, in 1928 Spiridonov's students won their match against Germany's judo wrestlers with the score of 2:1. Samoz was taught and practiced in the Dynamo Institute, which, as well as being a physical development research institute, conducted training officers of the NKVD (the Russian secret police), and later the KGB (which superceded the NKVD following World War II), as well as Stalin's bodyguards, the *Sokoly Stalina*, Stalin's Falcons. While Oschepkov's wrestling system was to become basis for sport sambo, Spiridonov's samoz would evolve into the secret combat sambo, taught to the spies and the secret police.

With the 1930s, a new era of mass repression, general fear and suspicion came to Russia. As judo came from Japan, USSR's enemy during that time, clouds of hostility and distrust started to thicken about Oschepkov's system. Those who taught it were in danger of being accused of spying against the USSR. In those days the smallest shadow of suspicion, produced even by a false accusation, could mean the end of a person's career, and often their life. The slogan "better to arrest ten innocent people than to miss one spy" was the basic operational principle of the security services of those years. Judo was eliminated from the curricula of physical education institutions. Judo competitions, set up by Oschepkov, were abolished. There was pressure on Oschepkov to deny the oriental origin of his new fighting system and delete all similarities between this system and oriental martial arts. Oschepkov could not be passive in the face of such absurd and cowardly actions. He refused to yield, and, just months before his death, wrote sharp letters to the USSR Sports Committee, to the Army Physical Education and Sport Institute, and to the physical education institutes in Moscow, Leningrad, Ukraine, and Caucasus. Of course he did not receive any replies. At the time Oschepkov was working on a book with results of his hard efforts. He did not finish his work. On October 2, 1937, he was arrested as a suspected "Japanese spy", and, ten days later, he was dead. Oschepkov's students were not arrested yet, but they felt the threat above them and above their teacher's wrestling style. They had to save not only themselves, but also their sport. The only way this could be done was by crossing out their teacher's name and denying the "suspicious" Japanese origin of

the wrestling he taught. It had to be given a new, purely soviet, name and biography. Thus the claim was made that this wrestling system emerged from the numerous ethnic national wrestling methods of the southern and south-eastern republics of the Soviet Union. Indeed this claim was not entirely false, since, as was mentioned earlier in this paper, Oschepkov and his students did borrow heavily from these methods.

In October 1938, an all-USSR meeting of wrestlers was organized in Moscow. It is at this meeting that sambo wrestling was officially born. One of Oschepkov's foremost students, Anatolii Arcadievich Kharlampiev, arrived to promote a "new" kind of wrestling, which he claimed to have created from an amalgam of Russian folk-wrestling styles; he called it "free-style wrestling". Of course this was just Oschepkov's wrestling, and the people who practiced it knew that. But the official version of the history was clear—Kharlampiev was the sole creator of this wrestling. Oschepkov's name was crossed out, and Kharlampiev with his associates made great efforts to deny and delete all similarities between sambo and oriental martial arts. Kharlampiev wrote: "the ethnic wrestling styles of our immense Soviet Union were the base for the creation of our new, common, wrestling". The clouds of suspicion soon disappeared and large competitions began, at first with teams from a few different cities competing, and then, since 1939, USSR national championships. After World War II, in 1946, the name 'sambo' was officially given to this Russian wrestling style, and Kharlampiev became the credited as the originator and leader of sambo. Although there is no doubt that he was a skilled fighter and a dedicated professional, Kharlampiev never gave

Oschepkov his due. Even years later, after Oschepkov's name was cleared, Kharlampiev continued to uphold himself as the sole creator of sambo. He continued to spread the myth that he was ordered by N.I. Podvoiski to create sambo in 1922, which can not be true, since in 1922 Kharlampiev was just fifteen years old.[16]

Developments after World War II

Originally sport sambo was practiced only in the USSR. But in 1962, the sambo practitioners, sambists, deemed their sport sufficiently developed to test it internationally. They arrived at the Essen European Judo Championships, and took third place, capturing five medals. The judoka, of course, noticed the similarities between sambo and judo, but there were also differences. The arrival of the Russians changed many of the traditional judo attitudes, and in this way sambo started changing judo. The sambists…

> …were fighters who had very different training methods, and who were accustomed to picking up opponents at any opportunity. They were not worried whether the techniques had proper Japanese name (sic) or not. Their aim was to throw their opponents flat on there (sic) backs – and uranage was just as good as seoi-nage as far as they were concerned. Furthermore, they trained for this, both physically and technically. This fresh view prised open competition judo. Suddenly, nothing seemed sacred any more.[17]

The Russians "revolutionised modern-day judo with their unorthodox techniques derived from sambo wrestling, thus opening up a whole new range of ideas for modern judoka".[18] In a kind of reverse osmosis,

some of the most effective sambo techniques have now been absorbed into sport judo, with belt throws, leg picks, and crotch lifts seen commonly in European judo championships. In 1981 the International Olympic Committee recognized sambo as an Olympic sport.

Training and Principles of Sport Sambo

Let us examine the training and technical principles of sambo that allowed such a profound impact from this relatively young martial art. The sambo curriculum is based on learning to use and counter the techniques most likely to be encountered on the streets or battlefield. It starts simply, and progresses in range and depth of techniques based on the individual student's training needs. Teaching of techniques and tactics is supplemented with psychological and aerobic conditioning, and weight training, to make a tough and technical fighter. Sambo does not rely on *kata* or forms; instead, the superior training vehicles for honing fighting reflexes and instincts are considered to be the practical, fluid and unchoreographed situations common to combat and competition. From the sambists' point of view, a partner, who is compliant in performing a kata, harms the student by this compliance. Sambists do not train to perfect a technique, they train to become proficient with the technique in all situations. When a shoulder throw is studied, all the variations are explored at one time, so that the student is not confused or thrown off by minor deviations in execution. It is not important to master the perfect shoulder throw, it is important to throw the opponent down and submit him. Techniques

are explored from all angles without prejudice, except that it must be effective and able to be integrated smoothly into the student's overall repertoire. Standing techniques are examined to see if they can be used as groundwork, and vice versa. If a technique, such as a sweep, is executed with a foot, can a variation be developed using a hand or a knee? Judo rules and strategy concentrate on securing a throw, sambo fighters, to a much larger extent, tend to work towards a submission, with a throw or a take-down specifically used to set it up. Sambo allows leg and ankle locks (which are banned in competition judo), but prohibits chokes and strangles (common judo submissions). There are several reasons for this. According to Retuinskih, the popular judo choke holds using the collar of the clothing are based upon the national peculiarities of the kimono costume with its wide, loose-fitting lapels. But in typical cold Russian conditions, with buttoned-up collars, thick lapels, and frozen fingers, it's not worth the trouble to misuse exotic holds. The common ground for submissions in both sambo and judo are the arm-locks. Since sport sambo bans chokes, the sambists are particularly adept at applying arm locks from all angles and positions, including the flying arm-bars.[19]

Many sambo techniques and methods of generating speed and power are better suited to a European physique than those found in judo. Judo's footwork and body positions favor bodies that have long torsos but short arms and legs, like the body of an average Japanese person. Caucasians often have longer arms and legs, thus they lose power and speed compared to those with the former physique. Sambo adapts its techniques to take full advantage of these longer arms

and legs, a sambist, for example, can use his hands to sweep an opponent's legs out from under him. On the other hand, sambo is often the archive for techniques that have been lost in other arts. For example, many of the catch-as-catch-can wrestling styles once prevalent in North America included submission techniques such as neck cranks, toe holds, and bent arm and leg locks. Eventually these techniques were deemed dangerous, made illegal, and subsequently dropped from the modern American wrestler's repertoire, yet many of these techniques exist in today's sambo.

A sambist competes wearing *cambofki*, light sambo boots, *kurtka*, a tight jacket, and shorts so that the referee can judge the severity and risk of sambo's leg and ankle locks. The kurtka is worn to approximate modern-day street clothing and military uniform, a much better approximation to these clothing styles than a traditional judo gi. To a certain extent, the nature of the kurtka also serves to inhibit the secure grips needed to perform many classical judo throws and chokes. The color of a competitor's uniform (the matching kurtka, belt, and shorts) is either red or blue. The old Soviet system had eleven degrees of *black* belt. A national champion was awarded a sixth degree black belt, onto which symbols were sewn, representing the host country and organization for the event. A European champion, or other continental champion was awarded a seventh degree black belt. A gold medalist in the World Games earned a gold belt (tenth degree), a silver medalist was awarded a silver belt (ninth degree), and a bronze medalist was earned a bronze belt (eighth degree). The eleventh degree belt was gold, like the tenth degree belt.

Combat Sambo

Combat sambo is a very different style of fighting. While the idea of sport sambo is to take points and win without injuring yourself or the opponent, the spirit of combat sambo is "survive, and if someone hinders you, then injure or kill him", it is designed for killing, sabotage, personal combat, and interrogation. In the Soviet Union knowledge of combat sambo was classified and officially it was held not to exist. It was taught to the Soviet Special Forces, the *Spetznaz*. Combat sambo includes techniques from sport sambo, but uses them in different ways. For example, sport sambo includes the traditional shoulder throw of judo and jujitsu. In combat sambo this throw is done with the opponent's arm rotated up and locked at the elbow, so that if the opponent tries to counter by lowering his center of gravity and pulling backwards, as done in sport sambo, his arm is broken. Furthermore, in combat sambo, as the throw is executed, the opponent is thrown on his head rather than the back. Combat sambo also teaches counters to this throw that could be performed despite the locked arm, such as kicking out the opponent's knee and pulling back the head by the hair or gouging at the eye sockets. Besides such dangerous throws, the techniques include kicks, punches, locks of the spine and neck, biting and eye gouging, weapon defenses with or without a weapon of your own, ground fighting, fighting in small spaces, tricks like throwing your jacket on the opponent's head, and so on. Tactics and strategy of fighting both alone and in groups against single and multiple opponents are taught.

Recent Developments in Russian Martial Arts

The Russian combat arts evolution does not end with sambo. With the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, many fighting systems emerged, some of them claiming to be "the old Russian martial art", rooted deep in the centuries. During the past decade, two styles in particular have gained widespread popularity: *systema*, the System, and *ROSS*, or *Rossiyskaya Otechestvennaya Systema Samozaschity*, the Russian Native System of Self-defense.

Systema

Systema is a combination of Spiridonov's samoz, and the style adopted by Stalin's bodyguards the Sokoly Stalina. It was developed by Mikhail Vasilievich Ryabko, a Spetznaz colonel, and former chief instructor of tactical training for emergency response teams, and Vladimir Vasiliev, also a former Spetznaz soldier, who now resides in Canada.[20] Some authors claim that Systema is derived from Systema Rukopashnii Boi, a Russian system of hand-to-hand combat, or Systema Boyevogo Iskustvo, Russian System of Martial Arts, but other evidence seems to focus on the individuals named previously.[21] Systema does not teach techniques, either individually or in series, relying instead on instinctive reaction and relaxation so as not to limit its practitioner's solutions and possibilities. What is taught instead is a "state of consciousness". Fear produces unnatural movement, which is destructive in a confrontation. Systema is taught as a faith-based system—faith in the fact that everything we need to defend ourselves is already within us. The natural, faith-based response to a strike

or a grab, for example, is to vacate the space that is being invaded by the opponent, so that no energy transfer can take place. A systema student is taught to visualize themselves as an "energy field", with "no separation of body from mind". When an opponent attacks, he also brings in it the solution to his attack, and if the student relaxes and "listens", the solution will become clear, and all he has to do is implement it. Techniques are not taught so as not to distract from this approach.

The roots of systema derive from edged-weapon, lethal force combat, where one most certainly has to vacate the space attacked by an opponent's weapon or face serious consequences! A systema practitioner does not try to control the chaos and forces of combat, instead choosing to use them against the opponent. The proper use of breath is extensively emphasized. The main training tool is slow-speed sparring, which sharpens awareness, perception, and understanding of the body's movements. Students are taught to look above the opponent's eyes with defocused vision, picking up the rhythm of the opponent's movements and blending with them. The power and speed of the attack is used to unbalance, strike, or throw the attacker.

Completely opposite to many Eastern arts, systema has no set fighting stances, instead teaching the practitioner to fight from any position. It stresses relaxation, and students are trained to slow down their movements in combat, rather than accelerating them, and to reduce power in strikes, rather than trying to generate maximum power. Systema's practitioners are so relaxed that they smile during a fight, rather than expending energy on blood-curdling yells. The purpose

of systema is not merely preparation for violence, but improvement of the student's general mental state, health and flexibility. As with most martial arts, systema practitioners also learn weapons use (both defense and offense) in addition to unarmed, open-hand combat.

Yet another difference between systema and asian martial arts is in blocking techniques. In systema, practitioners are taught to use the shoulders and chest to redirect high strikes so that the hands may be kept low to protect the groin.[22] Consequently, blocks occur much closer to the body, as the shoulder naturally has less "reach" than the arm. One strength of this approach is that it encourages much closer combat than in other schools, the better to enable throws and joint locks.

ROSS

The roots of ROSS, the other Russian system popular today, can also be traced to Spiridonov's samoz.[23] To the outsider, ROSS and systema appear very similar to each other, but they are taught by different organizations. ROSS was developed in the 1990's by sambo coach Alexander Retunskih, who combined his knowledge of sambo and many other martial arts, with his study of modern physiology, biomechanics, human behavior and combat psychology. Compared to systema, it can be said that ROSS focuses more on performance enhancement rather than the no-nonsense combat orientation of systema. As in systema, the basic maxims of ROSS are "no techniques are good techniques" and "avoid techniques – pay attention to principles". The point

being that in combat, the student does not rely on a fixed set of techniques, but makes the best use of his or her natural tendencies and abilities. There are no fixed stances, forms, or rules. Instead of learning specific techniques, students are encouraged to create attacks and defenses for each specific context, with movements derived from circumstances. Instructors refer to studies of neuromuscular pathways, which show that many thousands of repetitions are required to ingrain one "foreign" physical activity into the muscle memory of the human musculo-skeletal frame. The solution in ROSS is elimination of techniques and tedious repetition, instead the focus is on breathing and "plasticity, absence of resistance, adaptability and malleability. In combat, a ROSS practitioner stays yielding and supple, accommodating the threat, staying in contact, and applying basic motions until the assailant is completely neutralized, while minimizing losses for all involved. ROSS does not use force against force, or counter force with subsequent force, but rather aligns with the nature of the attack, guiding it to resolution.

Training is methodical, with the instructor's main goal being to "share with the student how to teach themselves". Every student is a master of their own movement. There are eight general directions in training:

- Russian style hand-to-hand combat and survival;
- renovated practice of sambo and judo;
- executive, private professional, and close protection training;
- weapons training;
- acrobatic dance, stunt and theatrical combat;

- health development systems;
- advanced contact sports (such as soccer, rugby and hockey);
- and hand-to-hand sport fighting.

The weapons used include:

- the bayonet-equipped AK-47 assault rifle,
- SKS rifle,
- carbine,
- *spetsnozh* (a special forces knife),
- shovels,
- throwing knives,
- batons,
- military belts,
- pistols,
- swords,
- axes and other nonstandard weapons.

The training does not stop with the physical, however, as ROSS teachers insist that it is more than a style of fighting, claiming that it is a system of "combative performance enhancement", which is achieved through both "physical" and "moral" training.[24]

Combat is a trial of both "moral" and "physical" force; the moral is less tangible and more difficult to quantify, but certainly no less important for the outcome. ROSS recognizes this, and training includes the study of fear, how it can be managed during a combat situation, and how it can be effectively used against an opponent. What do you do when the unpredictable happens? How do your control your energy and prevent panic? The key is "switching to the machine"[25]—a purely logical and systematic mode of operation that lacks emotion and has been developed through training and experience. The "machine" is

separated from outward appearance and is trained to neutralize the threat in the most efficient manner. In this way, ROSS teaches its practitioners to deal with anxiety management in combat.

Conclusion

Russian martial arts have a long history and, today, are growing in variety and popularity. The primitive fisticuffs of ancient times have been replaced with the rich and complex accretion of sambo, both a martial sport and a fighting art, which has extensively influenced the development of contemporary judo and of modern self-defense techniques. This evolution continues into the twenty-first century, with systema and ROSS now shifting the focus from traditional, purely technical, martial arts training, to combat anxiety management, breathing, spontaneity, and conflict resolution. Hopefully all three of these martial styles will continue their development, and their popularity in the West will grow as they become more well-known.

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Endnotes

1 Travkin.

2 SATBI.

3 Sobor.

4 Bazlov.

5 Frux, Chronology page at http://www.geocities.com/medievalnovgorod/nov18.html .

6 *Ibidem*, Warfare page at http://www.geocities.com/medievalnovgorod/nov11.html

[7] Travkin.
[8] SATBI.
[9] Carpe Noctem.
[10] Female Single Combat Club.
[11] Shaolin Chow Ka Kung Fu School WA.
[12] Kodokan.
[13] Lukashev.
[14] *Ibidem.*
[15] *Ibidem.*
[16] *Ibidem*
[17] Van de Walle, p.17.
[18] Adams, p. 8.
[19] Jacques and Anderson.
[20] Williams.
[21] Systema
[22] Robinson
[23] Shaolin Chow Ka Kung Fu School WA.
[24] Sonnon.
[25] *Ibidem.*