

# Flying anything to anybody

The rise and fall of Viktor Bout, arms-dealer extraordinaire, shows a darker side of globalisation



**V**IKTOR BOUT knew, long before his plane lifted off from Moscow, that they meant to snatch him. For years he had hunkered down in the Russian capital, making only rare forays abroad. Western spies, the United Nations and do-gooder activists were after him. They said that he had smashed arms embargoes and struck deals with a remarkable axis of ne'er-do-wells: supplying weapons and air-transport to the Taliban, abetting despots and revolutionaries in Africa and South America, aiding Hizbullah in Lebanon and Islamists in Somalia. He also found time to supply American forces in Iraq, perhaps al-Qaeda too, and maybe even Chechen rebels.

He denied all wrongdoing and, no doubt, thought his accusers irritating and hypocritical. But until the fuss died away he knew that he was safe only in Russia, from where extradition was impossible.

Yet Mr Bout, a puzzling, amoral and intelligent man, made a poor choice in March, leaving behind his wife and daughter and flying to Bangkok. As a consequence he may end up in New York as the

star of a trial that would provoke echoes of cold-war spy games, further chilling relations between the West and Russia.

A shy and plump man, for years his only public image was a grainy, Soviet-era passport photo. That shows a dumpy, youngish face, with drooping eyes peering above a thick, triangular, moustache—the sort one might buy in a joke shop. He was probably born in what is now Tajikistan but, as with the picture, details of his life are fuzzy. American prosecutors say that he uses at least half a dozen passports and more aliases, including “Butt”, “Budd”, “Boris”, “Bulakin” and “Aminov”. A gifted linguist, he slips easily between as many languages as he has names.

He rose to the rank of major in the GRU, an arm of the Soviet armed services that combined intelligence agents and special forces—in British terms “a combination of MI6 and the SAS”, says an academic. Clandestine work in Africa prepared him for his future career. Mark Galeotti, of Keele University, believes that Mr Bout suggested to his military bosses in 1993 that he went into

“active reserve”, taking surplus aircraft to trade stuff in Africa and beyond.

Unofficially, he would have given payments to his old chiefs as planes and other stock were released. His goal was not nationalistic: it was to get rich quickly. “He enjoys the buzz of doing something well,” says Mr Galeotti. Those who studied at language school alongside Mr Bout recall him not as a thrill-seeker, but as a swot who relished success.

Mr Bout chose a useful time to come of age. As the Berlin Wall tumbled, supplies of surplus weaponry and fleets of military transport aircraft were up for grabs. Soldiers and air-force men, even senior ones, were poor and easily bribed; stocks of weapons, especially in remote corners such as Moldova, were barely monitored.

With supply assured, demand for his goods and services grew. As most outsiders abandoned interest in Africa and Central Asia, poorer governments lost their cold-war sponsors and many then collapsed, allowing wars to flourish. Where America and the Soviet Union had once vied to

► dump weapons on friendly governments, now Mr Bout stepped in. Arms-traders were not new to Africa, but space opened up for men such as Mr Bout.

Another boom in the 1990s was the provision of humanitarian aid during conflict, such as the wars in Somalia and Congo. Donors wanted to get goods—personnel, tents, food, medicine and the like—to remote airstrips. Mr Bout had big, rusty aeroplanes for hire to all comers.

His business, as detailed in “Merchant of Death”, a book by Douglas Farah and Stephen Braun, two American investigative reporters, proved vastly profitable—an associate claimed this year that Mr Bout was worth \$6 billion. It was also intensely complicated. He set up fast-changing firms with many fronts and names, providing air-logistics and weaponry to any client who could pay.

He shifted the paperwork of his planes, at times in mid-flight, registering them in far-flung corners such as the African dictatorship of Equatorial Guinea. His pilots learnt to travel with a pot of washable emulsion paint, ready to daub new identification numbers on the fuselages. At his peak he had over 50 aircraft, including huge Antonovs, on his books.

He avoided cameras and questions yet gradually became an anti-celebrity, the most notorious arms-dealer on the planet. In the 1990s activists, notably from Global Witness, a London-based group which studies the links between wars and natural resources, showed how sales of “blood diamonds”, oil, gold, timber and other commodities help to fuel conflicts.

### Lord of war

Some rebels, such as the Revolutionary United Front in Sierra Leone, bartered diamonds directly for guns. But there were arms embargoes, and trade is not easy in mountains and forests, using bumpy airstrips where aircraft can be smashed to bits if they are not first shot from the sky. The more that such wars are financed by illicit trade in commodities (rather than by the old cold-war means of outsider sponsorship for local forces) the more that entrepreneurial dealers such as Mr Bout can flourish.

Mr Bout's genius was to employ impoverished ex-Soviet pilots, ready to risk their lives for hard currency, and to send his aircraft anywhere they were needed (he rarely flew on them himself). At times that meant getting United Nations peacekeepers into Somalia, or delivering aid for the British government. More often, as the UN eventually described, he provided the logistics that kept cruel civil wars alive. Reportedly Mr Bout supplied, simultaneously, both the rebels and the government during Angola's civil war.

Similarly, he collaborated first with the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan and



Charles Taylor, a valued customer

then, after one of his aircraft was impounded for months by the Taliban, switched to trading with the Islamists. He probably helped the American forces to fly material to Afghanistan and certainly did so in Iraq. He was active in eastern Congo, where years of war have led to the deaths of millions. Alex Yearsley of Global Witness sums up his career thus: “There's nothing he hasn't done.”

One particularly favoured client made him prominent: Charles Taylor, the Liberian despot now on trial in The Hague for war crimes in Sierra Leone. Mr Taylor helped to spread wars in west Africa, arming insurgents who were able to weaken neighbouring governments. Mr Bout worked closely with him. But as the arms-dealer's infamy grew, so did the efforts to put him out of business.

A British minister, Peter Hain, did his bit by coining two annoyingly catchy nicknames, dubbing the Russian the “sanctions buster” and the “merchant of death”. In its turn Hollywood produced “Lord of War”, a fictional tale based on stories of his gun-running. (The producers reportedly used one of Mr Bout's planes when filming.) Mr Bout thought the film was rubbish and said that he felt sorry for Nicolas Cage, who played him as an arch-villain. Another film is in the works, said to star Angelina Jolie. Other books and dramas will follow.

The trouble was that as the myth of Bout grew, the notoriety helped his business. He had a reputation as a physical man and reportedly intimidated rival arms-traders in West Africa. Mark Kramer, a Harvard academic who has followed his career, calls him ruthless and violent when necessary. His minions liked to boast of his nicknames. And the myth-making helped to advertise his advantages: linguistic fluency; contacts from warlords to presidents; his access to weapons; his ability to air-drop anything, anywhere (would you like a miniature sub parachuted to the jungle?).

But fame can be awkward, too. It

helped to chase him from a comfortable home in South Africa (he may also have been worried about crime), then from the Middle East. In time his notoriety limited the travel that he loved. America put him on a blacklist of businessmen with whom it is illegal to trade.

He may perhaps have felt a little misunderstood, seeing himself as a canny entrepreneur, not a Bond villain. His accusers put little store in his concern for conservation, his love of animals, his wish to protect Congo's forests, his earnest desire to help the pygmies of central Africa and his devotion to the Discovery television channel. Some of his critics may even have been jealous. He deployed more aircraft than do some countries.

### Take-away chicken

His defenders describe him as nothing more dangerous than a flying lorry driver. If one week he made profits by dropping frozen chickens in west Africa, and the next by trading gladioli from Johannesburg to the Middle East, who was to care that, in between, he delivered a few million rounds of AK47 ammunition to a central African army? Americans did not object when he supplied an Antonov An-24 to deliver goods for their soldiers in post-invasion Iraq. So what if he is also rumoured to have ferried gun-toting and bearded men to and fro in the Middle East?

Certainly, he is no typical member of the Russian mafia. His clothes are understated but stylish; he favours a dark suit, a shirt open at the neck. No bling hangs on him; no scantily clad women sit on his knee dropping grapes into his mouth. At parties in Moscow, it is true, he was flanked by his bodyguards and young women who hovered, twittering at his unsmiling jokes. Suplicants also jostled to stand at his feet, wheeling for contracts, but that was how his business was done.

He liked to have the curious brought to him: at one party a British academic, who studies underworld types, was presented for a conversation. He left apparently impressed by the ironic twinkle in the Russian's eyes, concluding that: “He is one of the most engaging merchants of death I have come across.”

His triumphs could not last. Mr Bout flourished in the interregnum between the cold war and the rise of Islamist terrorism. He was carried along by the same factors—the spread of communications technology, the easier flow of goods over borders, international transfers of money with few questions asked—that spurred globalisation. But when political conditions changed, Western governments began to worry that arms-dealers might be getting in league with terrorists. The space for Mr Bout began to shrink.

Being cautious and well-informed, Mr Bout knew that Westerners were trying to

grab him. In 2002, as he flew from Moldova to Greece, he was somehow tipped off that British agents were waiting in Athens. The plane dropped him in a third country, leaving the spies to pounce on thin air. Two years later a trap was laid in Madrid but terrorist bombs intervened, preventing his travel. A dubious-sounding Moldovan firm had also, it is rumoured, once tried to lure him to Sudan, perhaps as a plan to have him snatched.

By 2008 the prospects of nabbing him looked remote. The two American authors who documented his career in "Merchant of Death" concluded that Western spies had "largely given up the chase". Nor would Russia hand him over: Vladimir Putin had no wish to see America put a Russian in the dock and portray him as Dr Evil. It seemed that his story would end with seclusion in Moscow.

And yet, in March this year, his guard slipped. Mr Bout stepped off a plane in Thailand, made his way to the five-star Sofitel in Bangkok and checked into a 14th-floor suite. His wife, who runs a fashion business, says loyally that he had travelled to do a cookery course. Sergei Ivanov, a Russian MP, claims that he had gone "to gather information on the aviation and construction business". His bodyguard offered a third story: they planned a great holiday and a visit to a medical centre.

Agents from America's Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), who recorded every word spoken by Mr Bout in his Bangkok hotel, tell a more convincing tale. The Russian made his way to a conference room on the 27th floor and met two men who, he believed, represented a left-wing Colombian group, the FARC. For roughly two hours they discussed how he would deliver on a long-planned arms deal.

He said that he understood the Colombians needed anti-aircraft weapons to shoot down American aircraft. And he offered to sell enough weapons to restart a large war: 700-800 surface-to-air missiles; 5,000 AK47 rifles; 3m rounds of ammunition; landmines; night-vision goggles; plus some "ultralight" aeroplanes that could be equipped with grenade launchers and missiles. He asked where American radar stations were located in Colombia and offered to sell two cargo planes for delivery of the goods. The price? A downpayment of at least \$15m or \$20m would do nicely.

The two men were also agents from the DEA who had spent months on the sting. Other agents and 50 local police had been staking out the building since dawn. The police burst in, guns drawn, and snapped handcuffs on Mr Bout, who merely cried out that "The game is over."

As with so much of Mr Bout's life, the sting could have been lifted from a Hollywood screenplay. The Russian now says that he was set up. In September the Russian parliament called for their businessman to be freed, condemning an effort to "damage the interests and reputation of Russia". But an indictment by American prosecutors, listing grand-jury charges and evidence, shows how keen Mr Bout was to trade with the FARC.

The Americans had played a clever game. In January they duped a close collaborator of Mr Bout's, Andrew Smulian, a Briton, into believing that three DEA agents, whom he met in Curaçao in the Netherlands Antilles, were really from the FARC. They handed Mr Smulian \$5,000 for expenses and told him that they wanted millions of dollars' worth of weapons.

They gave him a mobile telephone which they claimed could not be monitored (it was, naturally). He rushed off to Moscow to discuss the deal. Mr Bout was

cautious, asking Mr Smulian to pick out his contacts from photos of known FARC leaders, but even so he was somehow persuaded.

The disguised DEA agents then met Mr Smulian repeatedly, hopping between Copenhagen and Bucharest. Once Mr Smulian boasted that his boss was known as the "merchant of death", and said that 100 surface-to-air missiles could be delivered immediately—for \$5m they could be taken from Bulgaria and dropped where needed. At one meeting he flipped open a laptop to show pictures of armour-piercing rocket launchers and missiles that he said Mr Bout could provide, along with "special helicopters".

Mr Smulian, eager for the lucrative exchange, convinced his boss that it was safe to go on. The Russian then agreed to close the deal in person and received an e-mail

address (bogotazo32@yahoo.com) for communication. According to MotherJones.com, which published a detailed study of the sting, Mr Bout was poised to fly to Romania in February, where the DEA agents would have grabbed him. But at the last minute he was warned off by a nervous associate. Remarkably, however, he agreed to go instead to Bangkok.

Mr Smulian was also nabbed and now faces prosecution in New York. Mr Bout's fate is still undecided. Prosecutors in New York want to try him for assisting a terrorist group and have spent the year seeking his extradition. Russia's government wants him back. Thailand, too, may hope to prosecute him for dealing with terrorists.

For now he sits in Klong Prem special prison in Bangkok and appears, monthly or so, for extradition hearings. He has been humiliated by his arrest, and by his regular parade in unflattering prison garb of orange shorts and T-shirts. He scowls and laughs, walks in shackles and denies all wrongdoing. He has not dished dirt on his collaborators, but his reputation as a man who could outfox Western opponents is gone. He is thinner and his moustache has grown spikier. Difficult months await.

A big question remains. Why did he leave Moscow when he had proven so skilled at sniffing out risks? A comparison worth drawing is with his swashbuckling English equivalent, an old Etonian-turned-SAS-officer-turned-mercenary, Simon Mann, who launched a failed coup plot in Africa in 2004. The middle-aged Mr Mann pushed on with his hare-brained scheme even when he knew that he should have called it off. He was tempted by money and, perhaps more important, by the chance of a last adventure while showing off to his younger wife.

Mr Bout, too, had a myth to feed, money to make, a wife to impress and middle age creeping up. He may have disparaged his portrayal by Hollywood but he knew, too, that quiet retirement in Moscow was no way to keep a name in lights. ■

## Tempted by money and by the chance of a last adventure



Nicholas Cage glamorises Bout