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Heinemann-Grüder, Andreas

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Russia's State-Sponsored Killers: The Wagner Group

By Andreas Heinemann-Grüder (Bonn International Center for Conversion, Germany)

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Abstract

The importance of irregular military companies has been increasing for Russia since it began its war against Ukraine in 2014/15. These military companies act in coordination with the Russian Ministry of Defense, the Federal Security Service (FSB), the foreign intelligence service, and the presidential administration. Russia's mercenaries practice exterminatory warfare, and operate as parallel or shadow armies, which can rarely be held accountable.

The Wagner Group

Although the Wagner Group receives the most media attention, there are almost a dozen other Russian suppliers on the private military market. Known by name are the Wagner Group, the RSB Group, MAR, Shchit (Щит; En: "shield"), the Moran Security Group, Patriot, Redut-Antiterror (Center R), and Antiterror-Orel.

The Wagner Group was founded in the spring of 2014 by former Lieutenant-Colonel Dmitry Utkin. Utkin had already worked for the Moran Security Group and had previously been a member of the 2nd Special Reconnaissance Brigade of the Russian military intelligence service the GRU, and served as a commander of the private military company (PMC) Slavyansky Korpus in Syria. The Wagner Group came to be composed of former members of the Slavyansky Korpus, the GRU, the Russian Airborne Forces (VDV), various Spetsnaz units, and former Ministry of Defense staff. This force was initially assembled to provide military support to the separatists in Ukraine's Donbas region.

During the 2014–15 Ukrainian war, Utkin allegedly insisted that his troops wear helmets modeled on those worn by the *Wehrmacht* in World War II. The name "Wagner" refers to the German composer Richard Wagner, whom Utkin admires. Utkin was awarded the Order of Valor from the Kremlin on 9th December 2016, and a photo shows him with President Putin. In 2017, Utkin became general director of the Concord catering company, owned by the oligarch Evgeny Prigozhin, whose career began as a criminal in St. Petersburg. Prigozhin served a nine-year prison sentence for robbery, before founding a restaurant chain after his release, and later rose to become a catering supplier to the Kremlin via Concord, which is why he came to be known as "Putin's chef".

The Wagner group has been active in Ukraine, Syria, Sudan, South Sudan, Libya, the Central African Republic, Madagascar and Mozambique, Botswana, Burundi, Chad, DR Congo, Congo-Brazzaville, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, and the Comoros Islands.

It is controlled by the GRU, which equips, trains, and commands it.

In early 2016, the Wagner Group had about 1,000 operatives. In August 2017, this number had reportedly grown to 5,000, and in December 2017 it had risen to about 6,000. In total, approximately 10,000 men have already fought for Wagner. Currently, Wagner has an estimated 5,000 combatants, although exact numbers are difficult to assess, as mercenaries sign temporary contracts and rotate after deployments. Ukrainian intelligence identified 4,184 Wagner mercenaries by name as of December 2021. The Wagner Group's personnel also includes convicts, mostly felons, who since the summer of 2022 have been recruited directly from penal camps for deployment as part of the war on Ukraine, in exchange for the promise of exemption from punishment.

Wagner in Ukraine

Wagner combatants made up a part of the so-called 'little green men' who carried out the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and then fought in Donbas on the side of the separatists. The Wagner presence initially involved two units called 'Luna' and 'Steppe', each about 250 strong. One of the units consisted of the men around Dmitry Utkin. After the annexation of Crimea, about 300 Wagner personnel joined the separatists in Donbas and fought under the command of former GRU Colonel Igor Girkin (Strelkov).

In early May 2014, the Wagner Group helped separatist forces overcome Ukrainian security forces, capture local administrations, seize ammunition depots, control towns, and conduct reconnaissance. Wagner men helped enforce the monopoly on violence in the "Lugansk People's Republic" against wayward pro-Russian battalions. The presence of Wagner mercenaries meant that the often drunk and looting separatist forces were punished. In Ukraine, Wagner Group practices what it has learnt in Syria and Africa (see below): ruthless, indiscriminate murder. The Wagner Group was

involved in the shooting down of a Ukrainian military aircraft in June 2014, the storming of both Luhansk airport and Debaltseve, as well as, in 2022, the massacre in the city of Bucha.

Wagner in Syria

After Wagner “proved its worth” in Donbas, the Group joined Russia’s military intervention in Syria in September 2015. In Syria, Prigozhin was involved, with his oil company *Evro Polis*, in recapturing occupied oil and gas fields on behalf of the Syrian Energy Ministry. Twenty-five percent of the profits from the oil and gas fields went to *Evro Polis* after their liberation from Islamic State (IS) control.

The Wagner Group operated with over 1,000 fighters in Syria, playing a significant role in capturing Palmyra and Deir ez-Zor. Wagner still operates in Syria; its fighters are brought to Syria in military aircraft, treated in military hospitals in Russia, fight with regular Russian troops, and are awarded official army medals. Equipped and armed by the Russian Ministry of Defense and supported from the air by Russian fighter aircraft, the Wagner mercenaries did the “dirty work” against IS on the ground. The Wagner Group trained two Syrian military companies and then operated with them. In 2017, a Syrian army deserter, Muhammad Taha Elismail Alabdullah (Bouta), was tortured and cruelly murdered with a sledgehammer on camera near the Syrian city of Homs. Four Wagner men were involved in the murder.

Wagner in Libya

In 2020, Wagner fighters, financed in part by the United Arab Emirates, supported General Khalif Haftar’s forces in Libya. According to information provided by the chairman of the Libyan “High Council of State” Khalid al-Mishri in December 2021, at times as many as 7,000 Wagner fighters have been in Libya, with 30 combat aircraft at their disposal. However, these figures should be treated with caution. A UN investigative report covering the period from March 2021 to April 2022 proved that the Wagner Group violated international law in supporting Khalif Haftar by indiscriminately deploying mines in civilian areas. By the spring of 2022, approximately 900 of the previously 2,200 Wagner combatants were said to remain in Libya—the rest have been withdrawn to fight in Ukraine.

Wagner in Sub-Saharan Africa

PMCs are part of a broader strategy to reclaim Russian influence in Africa. Between 2014 and 2019, Russia became the largest arms supplier in Africa, accounting for 49 percent of all arms sold on the continent. Wagner mercenaries had been deployed to Sudan, the Central African Republic (CAR), Madagascar, Libya, Mali, and

Mozambique as of 2017. By the end of 2019, the Wagner Group already had an office in 20 African countries. In September 2019, Wagner sent between 160 and 200 of its personnel to Mozambique to contain the insurgency of the so-called Central African Province of the Islamic State (IS-CAP) on behalf of the incumbent government. However, the inability of the Wagner force to combat the IS-CAP insurgency led to a humiliating withdrawal in December 2019.

After a 2017 meeting between President Putin and Omar al-Bashir, then president of Sudan, in Sochi, security cooperation between Russia and Sudan picked up steam. In late July, 500 Wagner fighters appeared on the border between Sudan and the CAR. The 2021 military coup in Sudan that had replaced the interim civilian government was supported by the Russian government. In Sudan, one of Prigozhin’s companies was allowed to export gold from a Sudanese mine.

In March 2018, the Kremlin said that 170 “civilian advisors” had arrived in the CAR to train government forces. Back in 2017, the UN Security Council had suspended an arms embargo on the CAR and approved the deployment of 175 Russian trainers for the local military. With the exception of five soldiers, all were Wagner mercenaries. In the CAR, the Wagner Group served as a security advisor to President Faustin-Archange Touadéra. Since December 2020, an additional 300 soldiers from the Russian Army have reportedly supported the president against opposition rebels. Russian Special Forces, Wagner mercenaries, and the CAR’s pro-government military protected President Touadéra during his presidential election campaign in December 2020 and undertook joint military operations in the Bangui area against insurgent groups.

A UN working group on human rights violations by mercenaries accused the Russian mercenaries in the CAR of committing serious human rights violations along with the pro-government army, including rape, summary executions and targeted killings, torture, enforced disappearances, and murders. The Wagner Group has increasingly come to operate independently of the CAR government army, even as it continues to train and coordinate them. The presence of the Wagner Group makes it considerably more difficult for the UN mission MINUSCA to operate in the CAR, because they restrict the mission’s freedom of movement.

Since the capture of Boda, the Russian-controlled company *Bois Rouge* has been exporting precious woods from the CAR to Russia on a large scale. The importer in Russia *Broker Expert* is based in St. Petersburg and is a trading partner of Prigozhin’s empire. Companies from Russia, such as *Sewa Services*, *Midas Resources*, and *Lobaye Invest* were granted long-term mining licenses by the CAR government, particularly

for gold and diamond mines in Bambouri, Bornou, and Adji.

Wagner in Mali

For Russia, Mali is the beginning of its military power projection in West Africa. President Macron's political defeat in Mali marked the entry point for Russia. The Wagner mission in the CAR can be interpreted as a 'role model' for its operations in Mali. While French units and UN missions have been unable to demonstrate success against Islamist groups for years, Wagner mercenaries claim to "solve" conflicts with insurgents within weeks. Approximately 1,000 Wagner Group fighters have been operating in Mali since the fall of 2021. Wagner was only able to gain access against the backdrop of the failure of the EU training mission in Mali. During the EU mission, the security situation in Mali deteriorated continuously.

The Wagner Group offered Mali five helicopters on behalf of the Kremlin (which the EU mission lacked), but most importantly, the Wagner Group was willing to carry out massacres in Fulani villages. It also enjoyed a comparatively good reputation among Malian soldiers—a group of military officers had seized power in Mali in August 2020—because Wagner provided material and food, and its personnel went out on combat missions with Malian troops. The Malian soldiers' human rights abuses did not raise any concerns among their Russian partners.

Over time, however, Malian troops became increasingly disillusioned with the Wagner force as it dominated joint operations. Moreover, one consequence of the Wagner forces' indiscriminate killing operations was that relatives of villagers who had been arbitrarily killed began to join jihadist groups, increasing their numbers. At the end of March 2022, a massacre in Moura, a Malian village with inhabitants from the Peul and Fulani ethnic groups, killed between 200 and 400 people, and showed that the army and Wagner do not seek to distinguish between jihadists and civilians.

Since Mali cannot pay Russian mercenaries, they are either paid by Russian sources or draw income from Mali's gold mines. Many Malian officers have enjoyed training in Russia, and cooperation with the Soviet Union remains a good memory for many. On the ground, Wagner is dependent on logistics, enemy recon-

naissance by the Malian military, and the Malian military's knowledge of the local language and culture, which makes its forces quite vulnerable, in a way that was evident in Mozambique. The Wagner Group's approach is similar to the one it has employed in Ukraine and Syria: it deploys ruthless killer troops, but certainly does not solve any of the challenges that have led to the rise of jihadist groups.

Wagner's Shock Troops

The importance of Russia's irregular military companies has been increasing since the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the war in the Donbas between 2014 and 2022. They have become the regime's agents of influence, war profiteers, and an auxiliary force for state security agencies. Russian irregular armed groups interact with the Russian Ministry of Defense, especially the GRU, as well as the FSB, the foreign intelligence service (SVR), and the presidential administration. They complement but do not replace regular security organs.

Wagner's combatants specialize in capturing cities and positions held by irregular troops from the other party in a conflict. They provide agile ground forces for reconnaissance, sabotage operations, and the indiscriminate "liquidation" of people attributed to the opposing side. At the same time, there are repeated complaints from Wagner combatants that Russia's regular army puts them at a disadvantage when providing them with weapons, ammunition, vehicles, food and other supplies, or sends them on high-risk missions without providing support.

Russia's military companies are an instrument of Russia's foreign and security policy. They can be deployed flexibly and covertly, they cannot be held accountable for crimes, or only to a limited extent. Within their missions, business interests and military objectives are intertwined. Russia's military companies serve to destabilize pro-Western, and stabilize anti-Western, governments. They prepare for, support, and complement the deployment of regular forces and are likely to operate at a lower overall cost than regular forces. Deaths and injuries among irregular combatants are officially invisible. The exploitation of lucrative gold, diamond, oil or gas deposits is an expression of the economic and political fusion of oligarchic and military interests that lie behind these private military companies.

About the Author

Professor Dr *Andreas Heinemann-Grüder* teaches Political Science at the University of Bonn / Germany and is senior researcher at the Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies. He currently studies irregular armed groups and de facto regimes.