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Claremont McKenna College

The Role of the Wagner Group in the Russo-Ukrainian War

submitted to

Professor Hilary Appel

by

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for

Senior Thesis

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Abstract

The Wagner Group has emerged as one of the most prominent actors of the on-going Russo-Ukrainian war. Although Private Military Companies are banned by the Russian Constitution and Russian Criminal Code, Wagner has been able and permitted to operate all across the world as a foreign policy tool of the Russian state. However, Wagner's use and employment in Ukraine has differed drastically compared to Syria, Central African Republic and Libya, as the group is employed in a more conventional capacity. With many of the Russian successes in the east of Ukraine attributable to Wagner, the financier of the group, Yevgeny Prigozhin, has started to use these successes to criticize the way the war is conducted, creating tensions in the Russian political sphere.

This paper examines the role that the Wagner Group has played in the Russo-Ukrainian war. Moreover, the paper focuses on how the Wagner Group evolved from a small contingent used for advancing foreign policy goals to a considerably large parallel military structure alongside the Russian Army with a great degree of autonomy and political leverage, ultimately projecting power and posing a potential threat to Russian political and military elites.

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Introduction

On February 24, 2022, Russian Armed Forces launched a full-scale military invasion of Ukraine. Russian force quickly took hold of large swaths of territory in the east and south of the country, capturing large cities such as Kharkiv and Kherson. In a matter of weeks, the Russian military was threatening Kiev. However, due to the fierce fighting of the Ukrainian army (UA) and Russia's underestimation of Ukrainian resistance, the UA was able to push the Russian forces out of the north. In April, the Russian military command re-oriented their full focus on the east and south of the country, looking to expand their military gains in the Donbass and around Kherson and Zaporizhzhia. Although the Russian forces were making gains, those came at a great loss of lives and equipment. Finding it difficult to mobilize enough volunteers to fight in the "Special Military Operation," as the Russian President called it, the Kremlin started increasingly relying on the Wagner Group – a private military company financed by the Russian oligarch Yevgeny Prigozhin.

From late spring to late summer, the Wagner Group was associated with most of the military successes for the Russian side, most notably the capture of Popasna and Severodonetsk as well as settlements around the city of Bakhmut. In the beginning of the war, there was only limited information available about Wagner's part in the Russian offensive. However, Prigozhin's public acknowledgement as the leader of the group in late September 2022, and the leaked video of Prigozhin recruiting prisoners in Russia to fight in the war, has shot him and the private military company into the limelight. Furthermore, Prigozhin has become increasingly vocal about Wagner's role in the war effort and highly critical of the Russian Ministry of Defense, claiming credit for Russia's successes on the battlefield.

Given the Wagner Group's emergence as one of the most prominent actors in the Russo-Ukrainian war, this thesis seeks to analyze its impact on the Russian war effort in Ukraine. What has prompted Russia to employ them on the battlefield and what kind of possible repercussions does the use of a parallel military structure have on regular armed forces and the Kremlin? These are questions motivating this research.

This thesis is divided into 6 chapters. The first chapter looks at the origins of the Wagner Group and how to classify it, considering the legality of the group according to Russian law, the leadership of the group, and the group's previous deployments in Ukraine and elsewhere. The second chapter looks at the use of the Wagner Group as a Russian foreign policy tool. The third chapter focuses on how this organization recruits and trains soldiers. In the fourth chapter an overview will be given on how Wagner has been used in operational form since the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. The fifth chapter of the thesis analyzes how the recruitment advantage of Wagner serves the interest of the Russian war effort. Finally, the thesis discusses the implications of this group on domestic politics and power struggles in Russia. This thesis seeks to show how the Wagner Group evolved from a small contingent used for advancing foreign policy goals to a considerably large parallel military structure alongside the Russian Army with a great degree of autonomy and political leverage, ultimately projecting power and posing a potential threat to Russian political and military elites.

More specifically, the thesis argues that Prigozhin and the Wagner Group grew in power as they were able to achieve considerable military success on the battlefield from late spring until fall compared to the Russian Army. This was further compounded by the Wagner Group's novel recruitment methods from Russian prisons that helped alleviate the deficiencies in manpower on the battlefield. However, the rise in power of Wagner increasingly became a liability for the

Kremlin which prompted active efforts to thwart its power, namely in three ways: by limiting its capacity to recruit new fighters; by creating other parallel military structure to de-monopolize Wagner's power in the Russian private military sphere; and by denying credit to Wagner for its military successes in order to bolster support for Russia's conventional military forces.

Private Military Companies and the Wagner Group

In order to analyze the Wagner Group's role in the "Special Military Operation" in Ukraine, it is important to understand Wagner's origins and structure as an organization. This section addresses under what kind of a classification it should fall under, according to Russian and international law. What are its roots historically, and how did it come into being? Finally, who runs and funds the organization and how has it functioned in previous conflicts and wars?

In some respects, the Wagner Group shares important traits with private military companies. Due the widespread use of private military companies (PMCs) by states in varying functions and capacities, it is difficult to provide a clear-cut definition of what actually constitutes a PMC. In the U.S., we can look at the private military sector as a private version of the US Army, consisting of combat services, combat arms and combat services support. PMCs constitute a private sector equivalent of the combat arms as they are involved in missions or tasks that put them in the line of fire. In his book *The Modern Mercenary*, Sean McFate offers a very narrow and specific definition for PMCs, that aligns well with the type of work that Wagner engages in. According to McFate, PMCs are "expeditionary conflict entrepreneurs" engaged in the "use of

lethal force or train others to do so.”¹ In other words, they constitute a specific subset of overall activities that private security companies, or PSCs, engage in. McFate lays out five guiding principles that make it possible to delineate PMCs from other armed non-state actors:²

1. They are mainly motivated by profit.
2. They have a business-like structure allowing them to participate in the global financial system.
3. They are foreign focused.
4. They employ force in a military manner.
5. They are lethal and represent the commodification of armed conflict.

Not all of these conditions have to be perfectly met in order for an actor to be considered a PMC. For example, Russia’s use of Wagner Group in Ukraine can be seen as politically motivated, however this falls short of disqualifying the group from being treated as a PMC, as they have shown profit-motivated behavior for example in Syria. There is also no clear counterevidence to prove that Wagner isn’t profit-motivated in Ukraine.

Most coverage of Wagner in the Western media involves the label “mercenary group.” McFate usefully differentiates between mercenaries and PMCs and argues why wrong labelling might be misleading. According to McFate, PMCs are more concerned about their reputations than mercenaries. They aim to establish a longer lasting relation with their clients - a so-called “monogamous public-private relationship with a government” - compared to mercenaries who will fight for anyone for profit.³ The main differentiators here are for whom the militants fight and the

¹ Sean McFate, *The Modern Mercenary: Private Armies and What They Mean for World Order* (New York: Oxford university press, 2017).

² McFate.

³ McFate.

kind of a relationship they hold with the party contracting their services. In the case of Wagner, it falls into a bit of a gray zone, since sometimes this group has clearly been hired to fight on behalf of a state, like Syria or Russia, and sometimes on behalf of a business interest and Russian allies.⁴ At the same time, the group has come under criticism for mercenary like behavior, being associated with what can be classified as war crimes and unnecessary violence.⁵

PMCs and Russian Law

PMCs can be examined on two different levels of Russian law. First is the Russian Criminal Code's Article 359 points 1 and 3. Point 1 makes illegal the "Recruitment, training, financing, or any other material provision of a mercenary...." This seems to point towards the illegality of setting up an organization such as Wagner and sets up the possibility of punishment for the founder of said organization. Article 3 outlaws "Participation by a mercenary in an armed conflict or hostilities," pertaining to the individuals employed in mercenary capacities. The criminal code also defines the term mercenary as:

a person who acts for the purpose of getting a material reward, and who is not a citizen of the state in whose armed conflict or hostilities he participates, who does not reside on a permanent basis on its territory, and also who is not a person fulfilling official duties.⁶

The interesting part here is what constitutes official duties and whether or not actions or missions sanctioned by a state entity constitute an official duty and whether this circumvents the definitional illegality of these actors. The Russian Constitution also outlaws PMCs according to Article 13, point 5, which states that "the creation and activities of public associations whose aims

⁴ Kimberly Marten, "Russia's Use of Semi-State Security Forces: The Case of the Wagner Group," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 35, no. 3 (May 4, 2019): 181–204, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2019.1591142>.

⁵ Marten.

⁶ <http://www.russian-criminal-code.com/PartII/SectionXII/Chapter34.html>

and actions are aimed at setting up armed units shall be prohibited.”⁷ However, these laws have not been successful in actually prohibiting the creation of these types of units, because they obtain a quasi-legal status through a different provision of the law or they register themselves outside of the Russian Federation.

Although PMCs remain illegal, in 2016 a change to the Russian military law allowed for short-term paid military service abroad, possibly hinting at Putin’s approval of such organizations acting in accordance with state interests abroad.⁸ Furthermore, in 2018 President Putin signed a decree that classified the information of those who cooperate with the foreign intelligence services of the Russian Federation. This decree was most likely an attempt by the Kremlin to hide its collaboration with PMCs and makes the investigation of these organizations punishable by criminal prosecution.^{9,10}

The Russian State Duma has debated the issue of PMCs over the years. In January 2018, Russian MPs Sergey Mironov and Mikhail Emelyanov put forward a bill in the Duma that would regulate the creation, reorganization and liquidation of private military companies.¹¹ This bill however was rejected on the basis that it was unconstitutional. According to Bukkvoll and Østensen, this rejection could have been the result of infighting over which Russian security agency should have control over the contracting of these companies.¹²

⁷ “Chapter 1. The Fundamentals of the Constitutional System | The Constitution of the Russian Federation,” accessed April 22, 2023, <http://www.constitution.ru/en/10003000-02.htm>.

⁸ Åse Gilje Østensen and Tor Bukkvoll, “Private Military Companies – Russian Great Power Politics on the Cheap?” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 33, no. 1–2 (February 17, 2022): 130–51, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2021.1984709>.

⁹ Østensen and Bukkvoll.

¹⁰ Marten, “Russia’s Use of Semi-State Security Forces.”

¹¹ “UAWire - Kremlin Blocks the Bill Legalizing Russian Private Military Companies,” accessed October 20, 2022, <https://uawire.org/russia-will-not-legalize-mercenaries>.

¹² Åse Gilje Østensen and Tor Bukkvoll, “Russian Use of Private Military and Security Companies,” n.d., 53.

However, private security companies (PSCs) have technically been legal in Russia since 1992, as long as the companies' focus is guard duty at home or abroad.¹³ This gives leeway for companies to represent themselves as PSCs rather than PMCs, giving them a certain degree of quasi-legality. For example, Russian PSCs have guarded Russian-controlled oil fields in Iraq since the early 2000s.¹⁴ Another example would be the Moran Groups which contracts with Russian-owned maritime companies, providing legal anti-piracy service.¹⁵ This gives the Russian state a certain level of power and control over these companies in case they step out of line or act outside state interests.

The Origins of the Wagner Group

The origins of the Wagner Group are well detailed by Kimberly Marten, Åse Gilje Østensen and Tor Bukkvoll. The Wagner Group seems to originate from a firm called Antiterror-Orel, established by special forces veterans, which provided security services to Russian companies operating in Iraq.¹⁶ An off-shoot of Antiterror-Orel, Moran Security Group started providing legal private security company services in the form of anti-piracy guards for Russian port facilities, oil tankers, and off-shore oil rigs.¹⁷ Several of the group members were arrested by Nigerian authorities on the charges of gun-running while on a guarding mission and had to be bailed out by the Russian government. This suggests that the Russian government was willing to fight for a PSC abroad while its employees were working for a Russian oil company.¹⁸

¹³ Østensen and Bukkvoll.

¹⁴ Østensen and Bukkvoll.

¹⁵ Marten, "Russia's Use of Semi-State Security Forces."

¹⁶ Marten.

¹⁷ Marten.

¹⁸ Marten.

According to a Russian investigative journalist, the Syrian government reached out to the Moran Security Group in 2013 in order to take back state-owned gas and oil infrastructure that the Islamic State had taken control of.¹⁹ Due to the illegality of performing such duties under Russian law, the group set up a subsidiary in Hong Kong under the name of Slavonic Corps.²⁰ The subsidiary sent 250 troops to seize the territory, but the mission was unsuccessful. Upon returning to Russia, two leaders of the Slavonic Corps, Vadim Gusev and Yevgenii Sidorov, were arrested and convicted for mercenary activities under Russian criminal law.²¹ It remains a mystery why the Russian government decided to prosecute these men, even though they were working for a Russian ally and had used Russian military facilities and equipment for transport. However, this indicates that Russia is willing to take legal action against PMC if it deems it necessary.

One of the members of the failed Slavonic Corps mission in Syria was Dimitrii Utkin, a veteran of the Russian Military Intelligence Unit, also known as GRU. After the Slavonic Corps ceased to exist in 2014, part of the organization transformed itself and appeared in the Donbass in Eastern Ukraine in 2015 under the name Wagner – the call sign for Utkin while he was in Syria.²² He also supposedly had strong affection for German composer Richard Wagner and, according to Marten, displayed sympathies for the ideology and aesthetics of the Third Reich.²³

Some analysts claim that the group was already active during the Russian annexation of Crimea, namely that Wagner fighters were embedded amongst the so-called “little green men.” This suggests that the group, or at least a precursor of it, existed in 2014, prior to appearing in

¹⁹ Østensen and Bukkvoll, “Russian Use of Private Military and Security Companies.”

²⁰ “Российские наемники в боях за Пальмиру,” Газета.Ru, accessed September 28, 2022, https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2016/03/22_a_8137565.shtml.

²¹ Østensen and Bukkvoll, “Russian Use of Private Military and Security Companies.”

²² Marten, “Russia’s Use of Semi-State Security Forces.”

²³ Marten.

Donbass.²⁴ However, the group really became consolidated when it was moved from Eastern Ukraine to a new training base in Molmino in Southern Russia in the summer of 2015, right beside the 10th GRU Special Forces Brigade.²⁵ Although Utkin acts as the military commander of the Wagner Group, the more recognized leader for the PMC is Yevgenii Prigozhin.

Prigozhin – Putin’s Chef

Since the Wagner Group is technically illegal in the Russian Federation due to Article 359 of the Criminal Code, the financier and leader of the group remained murky, as he could be prosecuted if he took responsibility. However, it was recognized among military analysts and observers alike, that the true financier and de-facto leader of the Wagner Group is Sergei Prigozhin. In fact, only on September 26, 2022 did Prigozhin claim the title of founder of the Wagner Group.²⁶ This was the first time that the founder publicly admitted the connection to the group. According to his response, the group was founded in May 2014, which comes later than the alleged involvement of Wagner troops in the Crimean annexation and their presence in the Donbass. This begs the question of whether the affiliated Wagner troops in those areas were part of a precursor group, such as Slavonic Corpus or instead whether he is attempting to distance himself from the annexation efforts of Crimea.

His acknowledgement seems to come after a video was released on September 13, 2022, in which he was filmed rallying convicts and prisoners to join the Wagner Group for six months

²⁴ Nathaniel Reynolds, “Putin’s Not-So-Secret Mercenaries: Patronage, Geopolitics, and the Wagner Group,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, accessed September 28, 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/07/08/putin-s-not-so-secret-mercenaries-patronage-geopolitics-and-wagner-group-pub-79442>.

²⁵ Østensen and Bukkvoll, “Russian Use of Private Military and Security Companies.”

²⁶ Cora Engelbrecht, “Putin Ally Acknowledges Founding Wagner Mercenary Group,” *The New York Times*, September 26, 2022, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/26/world/europe/russia-wagner-group-prigozhin.html>.

in return for amnesty.²⁷ The content and context of this video are further discussed in the next chapter as it sheds light on the desperate nature of the Russian state to recruit soldiers. It also exposes the recruiting criteria and capabilities of the Wagner Group in the Russo-Ukrainian War.

Prigozhin's rise to the inner circle of the Putin regime and to the position of the head of Wagner Group are fascinating considering his background. Prigozhin spent most of his 20s in prison, as he was sentenced to twelve years for drunkenness and attempted burglary, serving nine years of the sentence in total.²⁸ After being released from prison, he started a hot dog selling business in Leningrad in 1990 with his stepfather, and quickly moved onto managing a chain of grocery stores called "Contrast." He also opened up St. Petersburg's most prominent restaurant "New Island."²⁹ Putin first noticed Prigozhin when he brought heads of state, such as Jacques Chirac and George W. Bush, to dine at the restaurant.³⁰

A few years later, Prigozhin was running one of the largest catering companies, Concord Management, that received extremely lucrative catering contracts not only with Russia's schools but also the Russian army and defense ministries. Vladimir Pavlov, the person in charge of contracting food services to the Russian Army, had awarded by 2012 around 90 percent of the contracts to businesses affiliated with Prigozhin, at an approximate value of 92 billion rubles.³¹ The revenues received by Concord for the hundreds of tenders, were allegedly partly used to set

²⁷ "Leaked Video Shows Putins' Close Confidant Recruiting Prisoners for War against Ukraine," Euromaidan Press, September 15, 2022, <https://euromaidanpress.com/2022/09/15/leaked-video-shows-putins-close-confidant-recruiting-prisoners-for-war-against-ukraine/>.

²⁸ "Prigozhin's Criminal Past, Straight from the Source A Complete Translation of One of the Court Documents from the Case That Sent 'Putin's Chef' to Prison, Four Decades Ago," Meduza, accessed September 29, 2022, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2021/06/29/prigozhin-s-criminal-past-straight-from-the-source>.

²⁹ "Evgeny Prigozhin's Right to Be Forgotten: What Does Vladimir Putin's Favorite Chef Want to Hide from the Internet? — Meduza," February 17, 2018, <https://web.archive.org/web/20180217021523/https://meduza.io/en/feature/2016/06/13/evgeny-prigozhin-s-right-to-be-forgotten>.

³⁰ "Evgeny Prigozhin's Right to Be Forgotten."

³¹ "Evgeny Prigozhin's Right to Be Forgotten."

up the infamous troll farms of the Internet Research Agency linking Prigozhin to the Kremlin propaganda machine and further strengthened the view of him as a Kremlin puppet.³² The troll farm was also used to meddle in the 2016 US presidential elections leading the FBI to set up a bounty of \$10 million for information on Prigozhin.³³

Prigozhin lacked any kind of military and security background making him an unlikely candidate to provide security services to the Kremlin. However, throughout the years, Prigozhin managed to climb the Kremlin's social ladder and power hierarchy and make himself useful to the regime. He benefitted from this ever-tightening relationship in the process. He won tenders and secured the rights to the profits for certain oil fields that the Wagner Group helped to recapture and defend.³⁴

Wagner's Participation in Ukraine prior to 2022

As noted above, the Wagner Group is alleged to have first engaged in the conflict in Ukraine back in 2014, starting with the Crimean annexation and later fighting in the People's Republics of Luhansk and Donetsk. According to rumors, Utkin was involved in the killing of two pro-Russian militia commanders in 2015 and in the arrest of a third, Aleksei Fomichev.³⁵ The Wagner Group was seemingly providing stabilization services with the aim of establishing pro-Kremlin rule in the area, given there was serious infighting between the different rebel groups after the breakout of the war.³⁶

³² "Сотни Троллей За Миллионы - Новости Санкт-Петербурга - Фонтанка.Ру," May 29, 2014, <https://web.archive.org/web/20140529151751/https://www.fontanka.ru/2014/05/29/170/>.

³³ Jessica Lyons Hardcastle, "Feds Put \$10m Bounty on Putin Pal over US Election Trolls," accessed September 29, 2022, https://www.theregister.com/2022/07/29/feds_10m_bounty_russia/.

³⁴ Marten, "Russia's Use of Semi-State Security Forces."

³⁵ Marten.

³⁶ Marten.

Further evidence of Wagner’s involvement in Ukraine came after the battle of Debaltseve in January 2015, which was the last big battle in Eastern Ukraine before the full-scale invasion of Russia into Ukraine on February 24, 2022. The Wagner Group suffered serious casualties in battle and a few of the soldiers received the Russian military Medal for Courage in Death.³⁷ Furthermore, video footage emerged of Wagner soldiers wielding Russian military vehicles, pointing towards the group’s collaboration with Russian soldiers, or at least the support of the Russian Army.³⁸

Wagner Group’s Participation in Syria

Whereas the Wagner Group’s early participation in the war in Ukraine has only limited documentation, its participation in Syria is much better documented. Utkin had operated in Syria already in 2013 under the Slavonic Corpus, but in 2016 the Syrian government had employed a front company of the Wagner Group in order to seize Syrian oil and gas fields in return for a share of the profits from these entities.³⁹

The first documented participation of the Wagner Group in Syria is during the battle for Palmyra in February and March of 2016. The group assisted the Assad regime in liberating the city.⁴⁰ According to Russian investigative journalist Denis Korotkov, the Group lost 32 fighters in the battle.⁴¹ Furthermore, the Wagner fighters were not happy about the fact that the Syrian forces won the praise for the liberation of Palmyra, claiming to have contributed most to the success of the offensive.⁴²

³⁷ “Они сражались за Пальмиру (фото),” fontanka.ru - новости Санкт-Петербурга, March 29, 2016, <https://www.fontanka.ru/2016/03/28/171/>.

³⁸ Marten, “Russia’s Use of Semi-State Security Forces.”

³⁹ Reynolds, “Putin’s Not-So-Secret Mercenaries.”

⁴⁰ Østensen and Bukkvoll, “Russian Use of Private Military and Security Companies.”

⁴¹ “Список Вагнера (фото, видео),” fontanka.ru - новости Санкт-Петербурга, August 21, 2017, <https://www.fontanka.ru/2017/08/18/075/>.

⁴² Marten, “Russia’s Use of Semi-State Security Forces.”

The most notorious involvement of the Wagner troops in Syria occurred on February 7, 2018, when the group launched an offensive on the Conoco gas plant in Deir-el-Zour. Russian-speaking militias crossed the U.S.-Russia control line in Eastern Syria and started firing upon a Kurdish-controlled military base guarding the Conoco gas plant. As the Russian military command had stated that it had nothing to do with the offensive, the US Army conducted an airstrike on the invaders, killing scores of Wagner soldiers.⁴³ The wounded were flown by Russian military planes to Russian military hospitals, but the transport to the airfield from the battleground had to be organized by one of Wagner's subsidiaries Vesna Group, as the Russian military commanders in Syria were unwilling to assist, as Marten describes.⁴⁴ One explanation for this could be the desire to maintain plausible deniability by the Russian government of its use of private military contractors in the conflict. Another view presented by Marten is that there might have been infighting between the Ministry of Defense and Wagner.⁴⁵ A third perspective offered by Reynolds, is that the lure of the potential profits from the capture of the gas plant pushed Prigozhin to overreach.⁴⁶

Whatever the case, the debacle suggested a deterioration, at least for a period, of the group's relationship with Russian Armed Forces and their leadership. Accounts from soldiers fighting in the battle refuted the military's claim of ignorance about the possible retaliation from the US side; one soldier reportedly claimed that the Russian military promised aircover for the mission and it never materialized.⁴⁷ Prigozhin had also feuded with the Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu about who should take credit for the success in Syria in the early parts of the war. Amid the falling out,

⁴³ Marten.

⁴⁴ Marten.

⁴⁵ Marten.

⁴⁶ Reynolds, "Putin's Not-So-Secret Mercenaries."

⁴⁷ Reynolds.

the military's equipment provisions to Wagner dried up, alongside lucrative defense contracts from the MOD.⁴⁸ This is a good illustration of the infighting of the elites in Russia to win favor with the leader and to prove their usefulness to the Kremlin regime.

Wagner Group's Participation in Africa: The case of Sudan and Central African Republic

After the Deir-el-Zour debacle, one would have expected that Wagner's activities in foreign countries to slowly die down, but the opposite happened. In November 2017, the president of Sudan, Omar al-Bashir, visited Russia. Bashir and the prime minister of Russia, Dimitrii Medvedev, signed multiple treaties signaling the increased international cooperation between the two countries.⁴⁹ One of the documents signed was a concession agreement on gold mining between Russian company M Invest and the Sudanese Ministry of Minerals.⁵⁰ M Invest was established only months before the agreement in St. Petersburg, the director, Andrei Mandel, was employed earlier by Prigozhin's catering company.⁵¹ This, alongside Wagner's involvement in the country, viably connects Prigozhin to the operations of M Invest.⁵²

Furthermore, journalistic sources claim that the Wagner Group was active in providing military training assistance to the Sudanese armed forces.⁵³ This was further supported by the video posted on Twitter by Russian investigative journalist Aleksandr Kots, that supposedly shows the

⁴⁸ Reynolds.

⁴⁹ "Dmitry Medvedev's Meeting with President of the Republic of the Sudan Omar Al-Bashir," accessed October 20, 2022, <http://government.ru/en/news/30259/>.

⁵⁰ "Dmitry Medvedev's Meeting with President of the Republic of the Sudan Omar Al-Bashir."

⁵¹ Генлайн, "Wagner and Sudanese Gold," *Medium* (blog), March 13, 2018, <https://medium.com/@genline31626/%D1%81%D1%83%D0%B4%D0%B0%D0%BD%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B0%D1%8F-%D0%B7%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%BE%D1%82%D0%B0%D1%8F-%D0%BB%D0%B8%D1%85%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B4%D0%BA%D0%B0-%D0%B4%D0%BE%D1%88%D0%BB%D0%B0-%D0%B4%D0%BE-%D1%80%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%81%D0%B8%D0%B8-6e76b3b643f8>.

⁵² "'Putin's Cook' Set out to Mine Gold in Africa," *The Bell — Eng* (blog), June 5, 2018, <https://thebell.io/en/putin-s-cook-set-out-to-mine-gold-in-africa/>.

⁵³ "After Syria, Russian PMCs Are Ready to Land in Sudan," *BBC News Русская Служба*, accessed October 20, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-42225745>.

group training Sudanese soldiers on the ground.⁵⁴ The Wagner Group might also be present in Sudan in order to protect the mineral mining sites owned by M Invest, but this, according to Marten, is less clear.⁵⁵

In the Central African Republic, the story and connections between Wagner and the country's government are murkier. In December 2017, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov was able to convince the United Nation's Security Council to allow for Russian export of weapons and military training to the long-sanctioned CAR, in order to assist in the fight against rebels.⁵⁶ Russia used this agreement to send 170 civilian trainers to CAR and slowly started distributing arms to the newly trained troops.⁵⁷ It was also reported that Russian soldiers without insignias were providing security services to CAR President Faustin-Archange Touadera.⁵⁸

The connection between Wagner and the CAR seems to be through these civilian trainers. They are reportedly contracted through the company Sewa Security Services, which is a daughter company of Lobaye Invest, run by Yevgenii Khodotov.⁵⁹ Khodotov is also the director of the company called M-Finance, which is connected to the company Euro Polis – the company used by Prigozhin to sign oil contracts with the Syrian government as a reward for recapturing the oil fields under rebel control.⁶⁰ M-Finance also shares the domain name with Prigozhin's military catering

⁵⁴ <https://twitter.com/sashakots/status/940467146567700481>

⁵⁵ Marten, "Russia's Use of Semi-State Security Forces."

⁵⁶ Marten.

⁵⁷ "Midterm Report of the Panel of Experts on the Central African Republic Extended Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2399 (2018)" (United Nations Security Council, July 23, 2018), https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2018_729.pdf.

⁵⁸ Kimberly Marten, "Into Africa: Prigozhin, Wagner, and the Russian Military," *PONARS Eurasia*, January 4, 2019.

⁵⁹ Kimberly Marten, "Into Africa: Prigozhin, Wagner, and the Russian Military," *PONARS Eurasia*, January 4, 2019.

⁶⁰ Marten.

company Concord.⁶¹ This multi-layered system of companies all in some way associated with each other seems to point towards Prigozhin's presence in CAR, and by proxy Wagner. Another clue to this connection is the murder of three Russian journalists in July 2018, who were attempting to film a documentary about Wagner's presence in the region.⁶² The journalists were backed by the Center for Investigation – a foundation run by the former Russian Oligarch in exile, Mikhail Khodorkovsky.⁶³

The Role of PMCs in Russian Proxy Warfare and Implementation of Foreign Policy Goals

This chapter turns to the political context of the Wagner Group. How do PMCs and the Wagner Group in particular fit into the general framework of Russian proxy warfare and foreign policy goals? What are the different ways that PMCs operate and to what ends? Furthermore, how has the Wagner Group been used in previous capacities and conflicts and how it is being used in the current war in Ukraine? In order to answer these questions on the role of PMCs in Russian proxy warfare, I first define them in the context of the 21st century. I then consider and outline analytical frameworks developed by Russia experts, who have attempted to place PMCs into the wider context of Russian hybrid warfare. I then use these frameworks as a basis for analyzing the role of the Wagner Group in the current Russo-Ukraine war, and see whether its current use fits into any of the existing interpretations.

Utility of PMCs

⁶¹ Tim Lister Shukla Mary Ilyushina, Sebastian, "Murdered Chasing Mercenaries," CNN, August 4, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/08/04/africa/russia-journalists-car-intl/index.html>.

⁶² Shukla.

⁶³ Shukla.

One of the arguments for the emergence and use of PMCs is related to the difference of Russia's great power ambitions and great power capacities, measured typically on the basis of economic and military strength. Russia was the eleventh largest economy in the world in 2021 based on nominal GDP.⁶⁴ Furthermore, according to the Global Firepower Index, Russia ranked second militarily in 2021, after the U.S.⁶⁵ Thus, in absolute terms Russia seems positioned relatively well. However, this doesn't mean that Russia is able to convert this apparent strength into influence. Ostensen and Bukvoll outline three reasons why this might be the case, comparing and contrasting Russia to the U.S. and China:⁶⁶

1. Russia is less efficient in transforming input goods into goods that can be used to exert international influence.
2. Russia is unable to spend freely on foreign adventures.
3. Russia is surrounded by difficult neighbors that require tying military resources to territorial defense.

These difficulties, according to Ostensen and Bukvoll, have created incentives for Russia to seek out cheap ways of reclaiming great power status – one of them being the use of Private Military Companies.⁶⁷ There are several capacities the use of PMCs provide the Russian state apparatus. The first and most classic use of PMCs is in the capacity of war fighting state proxies. In this capacity, the PMCs might be used as a supplement to the state's army, engaging in physical conflict either as a force multiplier or in carrying out specific missions that require a high degree

⁶⁴ "World GDP Ranking 2021 - StatisticsTimes.Com," accessed April 13, 2023, <https://statisticstimes.com/economy/projected-world-gdp-ranking.php>.

⁶⁵ "2022 Russia Military Strength," accessed October 19, 2022, https://www.globalfirepower.com/country-military-strength-detail.php?country_id=russia.

⁶⁶ Østensen and Bukvoll, "Private Military Companies – Russian Great Power Politics on the Cheap?"

⁶⁷ Østensen and Bukvoll.

of professionalism. In this case, the PMCs are most likely employed directly by the state and thus cooperate with a centralized command structure. In this capacity, the PMCs might also function as “cover-ups” for Russian soldiers, or as “forces that coordinate other proxy forces on the battlefield.”⁶⁸ The most illustrative example of this is the Wagner forces fighting in Syria, where the PMC’s troops had a significant impact on the capture of Palmyra in 2016, having fought alongside Assad’s forces.

The second use case for PMCs is as grey zone operators. In this capacity, the main aim is to obfuscate responsibility or blame. This allows to avoid formal attribution to the Kremlin, while sending a clear message to the opposing party. In using PMCs as grey zone operators, as well as warfighting state proxies, with the common denominator the pursuit of political ends by military means. Furthermore, this capacity allows for the blurring of the military and non-military and can be used by the Kremlin for the purposes of plausible deniability, as the PMC is not formally part of the state, and can thus be blamed from acting out of desire for profits rather than state interests. An example of this is the use of Wagner troops in the Donbass, fighting alongside the soldier of the Peoples’ Republics. As was mentioned in the last section above, Russia denied any involvement for years in the Donbass, claiming it was solely the soldiers of the Peoples Republics fighting in order to distance itself and provide plausible deniability.

The third use case for PMCs is for security exports. In this capacity, “PMCs will form part of bilateral deals between governments where PMC services are traded as part of larger packages often involving political influence, economic rights and regime protective measures.”⁶⁹ This can be seen as a form of power projections, where the PMCs act as a proxy of state power and the

⁶⁸ Østensen and Bukkvoll.

⁶⁹ Østensen and Bukkvoll.

services used by the foreign states function as a means in tightening relationships between the relevant states. The use of Wagner's operatives in the Central African Republic and Sudan in training local troops and providing security services to prominent politicians stand as cases in point.

However, it must be noted that the security exports function of the PMCs, as described here, might represent the PMC as having lesser degrees of autonomy than they actually do. This shortfall will be addressed below by considering the PMCs acting in an informal network of complex relations, allowing for a greater degree autonomy for the operators of the PMC.

PMCs as Agents of Russian Proxy Warfare

One of the most compelling interpretations of the role of Russian PMCs is provided by Candice Rondeaux. According to Rondeaux, in order to understand the role of Russian PMCs, they must be seen as agents of a wider Russian proxy warfare strategy.⁷⁰ Furthermore, "proxy warfare must increasingly be understood in terms of relationships embedded within complex networks of influence and power."⁷¹ This means we must refrain from categorizing PMCs as agents solely motivated by profit or purely as pawns controlled by the Russian state. This is in contrast to being seen as existing in a certain gray area within the proxy warfare space, dictated by the interests of powerful individuals while still controlled to a certain extent by the Russian state apparatus.

Given that many of the Russian firms that do business with groups like Wagner, Moran, Slavonic Corps, etc., are majority state-owned, the main contracting party seems to be the Russian

⁷⁰ Candace Rondeaux, "Decoding the Wagner Group: Analyzing the Role of Private Military Security Contractors in Russian Proxy Warfare," *New America*, accessed October 21, 2022, <http://newamerica.org/international-security/reports/decoding-wagner-group-analyzing-role-private-military-security-contractors-russian-proxy-warfare/>.

⁷¹ Rondeaux.

state, and consequently the state is responsible for the conduct of those PMCs.⁷² This is well illustrated by the aforementioned example of the Russian state bailing out the Moran Security forces in Nigeria in 2013, illustrating that the state is willing to bail out the PMCs when it is in its interest or of relatively low political cost.

Another good illustration of the complex web of relationships and influence is all of the different companies and proxies used to hide the presence of Wagner Group in different parts of the world, such as Sewa Security Services. According to Rondeaux, this complexity hints at the importance and purpose of the PMCs in the context of proxy warfare – it obscures credible connection between the principal of the group and their connection to the networks of power in the Kremlin.⁷³

The arrangements between Russian PMCs and state-run companies, point to a high degree of control over the companies by these informal networks.⁷⁴ The Kremlin also seems to enable and support these companies, given the numerous connections to Russian military associations as well as many individuals publicly associating themselves with groups like Wagner.⁷⁵ The lack of consequences for Prigozhin for publicly claiming leadership of Wagner is another case in point. Furthermore, the illustrative example of collaboration between the Russian Armed Forces and Wagner in Syria seems to point to the high degree of tolerance for these groups as long as they act in the state interests.

Rondeaux presents Wagner as a ghost army of the Kremlin, where Prigozhin acts as a puppet master, leaving the notion that he is “a rogue profiteer, acting singularly and primarily in

⁷² Rondeaux.

⁷³ Rondeaux.

⁷⁴ Rondeaux.

⁷⁵ Rondeaux.

his own interest, a part of which entails keeping the Kremlin happy.”⁷⁶ Nevertheless, the overlap between PMCs and individuals linked to the Kremlin seems to refute the claim that any one single individual exerts complete control over these companies. Furthermore, this is supported by the instances of collaboration between the Russian Armed Forces and PMCs, as well as by cases where the PMCs act as a security mechanism for Kremlin connected interests and allies, as is the case in the Middle East and Africa. However, the complexity of the network of companies and blame shifting illustrates how the Kremlin attempts to keep these affiliations under wraps. This is further supported by the passing of the 2018 law, that classifies the information about companies and individuals that cooperate with the foreign intelligence services of the Russian Federation, and the murder of the three journalists who were investigating Wagner’s activities in the Central African Republic.

The use of PMC, once again fits into the Kremlin’s goals of enhancing Russia’s ability to project power and consolidate power at home, linking back to the aspirations for great power status, and in following the three-pronged approach of driving a wedge into the Euro-Atlantic alliance, bolstering relationships with former Soviet Union client states, and projecting power beyond Russian borders.⁷⁷ In his 2013 speech “The Value of Science is in the Foresight,” Russia’s Chief of the General Army Staff Valery Gerasimov pointed towards Russia’s understanding of the necessity of effective irregular forces for the achievement of strategic ends, with these forces having shown their relevance in conflicts such as the Arab Spring.⁷⁸ There has been a great focus in the security circles of the Kremlin in how to best adjust military structures in order to better

⁷⁶ Rondeaux.

⁷⁷ Andrew Monaghan, “Putin’s Russia: Shaping a ‘Grand Strategy’?,” *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)* 89, no. 5 (2013): 1221–36.

⁷⁸ Valery Sergeevich Gerasimov, “The Value of Science Is in the Foresight: New Challenges Demand Rethinking the Forms and Methods of Carrying out Combat Operations,” *Military Review* 96 (2016).

wage low intensity conflicts, the way that the United States did in Iraq and Afghanistan – PMCs seemingly fit well into this necessity and primacy for irregular forces, and allow for relatively low cost means to achieve it.⁷⁹

Manpower Generation Mechanisms

Given the Wagner Group’s use in prior conflicts, and given how Wagner fits into Russian proxy warfare strategy, it possible to evaluate how Russia’s use of Wagner in the “Special Military Operation” in Ukraine builds upon that history. This chapter discusses the way that Wagner has been able to recruit so many fighters, providing one of its most important benefits to the Russian state in the current Ukrainian war.

According to some of the latest estimates, there were approximately 50,000 Wagner troops fighting in Ukraine as of the end of January 2023.⁸⁰ The composition of the Wagner PMC, however, differs widely due to its recruitment methods. Even in prior conflicts, such as in Syria and the war in Donbass, the competency of Wagner soldiers differed significantly.⁸¹ Some of the operatives were highly trained and experienced members of Russia’s armed forces and intelligence services, while others had minimal military training.⁸² The more dramatic shift for the worse in terms of Wagner’s professionalism seems to have occurred in 2017, when a Wagner unit code-

⁷⁹ Rondeaux, “Decoding the Wagner Group.”

⁸⁰ <https://twitter.com/DefenceHQ/status/1616323761392812033>.

⁸¹ Sergey Sukhankin, ““Continuing War by Other Means’: The Case of Wagner, Russia’s Premier Private Military Company in the Middle East,” Jamestown, accessed September 29, 2022, <https://jamestown.org/program/continuing-war-by-other-means-the-case-of-wagner-russias-premier-private-military-company-in-the-middle-east/>.

⁸² “Russian Private Military Companies (PMCs)” (Congressional Research Service, September 12, 2020), <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11650>.

named 'Vesna' was formed, consisting of Ukrainian soldiers without any prior military experience.⁸³

This brings us to the recruitment methods employed by Wagner. Although the creation and existence of mercenary groups is highly illegal in Russia, the group has been able to use some unconventional methods of recruitment with the Kremlin's seemingly tacit approval. For example, the group used street signs in dozens of cities calling people to join the group.⁸⁴ Furthermore, the group has used affiliated Telegram channels that have promoted 3-month short-term contracts, with three weeks of training and 240,000-ruble salaries.⁸⁵

The most notable recruitment method of Wagner by far is the recruitment of soldiers to the group from correctional facilities and prisons, which has strongly exacerbated the decrease in quality of Wagner troops and created numerous problems for effective organization. The prison recruitment process started in the summer of 2022 and, according to Olga Romanova, was successful in signing up around 5,000 convicts by September.⁸⁶ This method was not widely publicized until a video of Prigozhin was leaked on the internet on September 12, 2022, where he is seen giving a recruitment speech to prisoner at Yoshkar-Ola, a city 400 miles east of Moscow.⁸⁷ The video outlines the prerequisites for soldiers, what they are recruited for, and what happens in the case of their death as well as desertion. The video explicitly states that the recruits from prisons

⁸³ Sukhankin, "Continuing War by Other Means."

⁸⁴ Raphael Parens, "Wagner Group Redefined: Threats and Responses - Foreign Policy Research Institute," accessed February 10, 2023, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2023/01/wagner-group-redefined-threats-and-responses/>.

⁸⁵ <https://t.me/sashakots/37289>.

⁸⁶ Olga Romanova, "No sitting this one out. Head of Russia Behind Bars on the military recruitment of inmates," *The Insider*, accessed February 10, 2023, <https://theins.info/en/opinion/olga-romanova/254906>.

⁸⁷ Christiaan Triebert, "Video Reveals How Russian Mercenaries Recruit Inmates for Ukraine War," *The New York Times*, September 16, 2022, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/16/world/europe/russia-wagner-ukraine-video.html>.

are to be shock troops and those who change their minds after the first day will be considered deserters and shot for treason.⁸⁸

The earliest Wagner contracts for convicts according to the organization Russia Behind Bars promised the following:⁸⁹

- A 100,000 rubles per month salary in cash
- A 100,000-ruble sign-up bonus
- Compensation for wounds received
- 5 million rubles in the case of death
- Privileges for family
- Amnesty after six months of participation

However, there seems to have been different salaries offered to different people, as some recruits have reported a salary as high as 230,000 rubles.⁹⁰ A Wagner POW and Russian convict, Vyacheslav Izmailov, in an interview given to opposition outlet *Meduza*, stated that he was promised a 200,000-ruble salary, as well as a safer position in the second frontline, alongside the promises listed above.⁹¹

Reports from convicts as well as statements from Prigozhin himself indicate that the selection process in the summer and earlier part of fall seemed more selective, where not every

⁸⁸ Triebert.

⁸⁹ Romanova, “No sitting this one out. Head of Russia Behind Bars on the military recruitment of inmates.”

⁹⁰ “‘Prigozhin says right away 80% will not be coming back’. How inmates are recruited into Wagner PMC to fight in Ukraine,” *The Insider*, accessed February 10, 2023, <https://theins.info/en/confession/254206>.

⁹¹ “Ukrainian Telegram channels published an interview with a former prisoner recruited by the Wagner PMC,” *Meduza*, accessed February 10, 2023, <https://meduza.io/feature/2022/12/13/v-ukrainskih-telegram-kanalah-opublikovali-intervyu-byvshogo-zaklyuchennogo-zaverbovannogo-v-chvk-vagnera>.

convict who wanted to enlist was chosen for participation.⁹² The health, age, status and reason for conviction seemed to have mattered. This is in stark contrast with some evidence from later in the fall 2022 when the Bakhmut offensive was claiming thousands of lives and the Wagner Group required more manpower due to the meat grinder tactics of offense. For example, In October 2022, Prigozhin confirmed the allegations by the Ukrainian Military Intelligence Directorate, that the group was recruiting soldiers who had tested positive for Hepatitis C and HIV, allowing a segment of the prison population prior excluded to be sent to Ukraine.⁹³

The recruitment drives seemed to have been successful in enlisting a large number of soldiers to fight for Wagner. Russian investigative media outlet Mediazona reported on November 18, 2022, that the number of prisoners has decreased by approximately 23,000 since the Group started recruiting from prisons.⁹⁴ The Wagner Group has reportedly also been recruiting from prisons in the occupied territories, predominantly in the Donetsk region, and sending prisoners straight to the frontlines without training.⁹⁵ Despite reports from only a couple days prior, that Wagner is still actively recruiting in Russian prisons and in some cases actually going back for a second round of recruitment, on September 9, 2023, Prigozhin made a press statement through his catering company Concord that the recruitment process from prisons has stopped.⁹⁶ According to

⁹² “‘Prigozhin says right away 80% will not be coming back’. How inmates are recruited into Wagner PMC to fight in Ukraine.”

⁹³ https://t.me/Prigozhin_hat/1886.

⁹⁴ “In two months, the number of prisoners in the male colonies decreased by a record 23 thousand people. This happens against the background of recruitment by the Wagner PMC.” Медиазона, accessed February 10, 2023, <https://zona.media/article/2022/11/18/navoynu>.

⁹⁵ “Wagner PMC starts recruiting prisoners from temporarily occupied territories,” December 6, 2022, <https://sprotiv.mod.gov.ua/2022/12/06/pvk-vagner-pochala-verbuvaty-vyazniv-na-tot/>.

⁹⁶ Reuters, “Russia’s Wagner Mercenaries Halt Prisoner Recruitment Campaign - Prigozhin,” *Reuters*, February 9, 2023, sec. Europe, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russias-wagner-mercenaries-halt-prisoner-recruitment-campaign-founder-prigozhin-2023-02-09/>.

Prigozhin, the group is fulfilling obligations for the already enlisted soldiers.⁹⁷ There is no reliable way of confirming whether this is actually true.

According to the Institute for the Study of War, the Wagner Group also started redeploying their troops and their proxies from Syria and Africa in early February 2022 in order to bolster their forces with experienced troops.⁹⁸ Furthermore, the redeployment from Syria and Africa of Wagner units was accompanied by an enlistment drive from these areas by the Kremlin, to bolster the regular army with up to 16,000 volunteers.⁹⁹ On April 19, 2022, a European official anonymously told the *Kyiv Post*, that around 10,000-20,000 mercenaries are fighting in Ukraine alongside the Russian Armed Forces, consisting of troops from Syria, Libya and the Wagner Group.¹⁰⁰ Reports also emerged in October, 2022, that the group might have been attempting to recruit soldiers from the Afghan National Army Commando Corps, troops which have been hiding from the Taliban government since the takeover in 2021.¹⁰¹ This is an extremely vulnerable group that could be persuaded by financial incentives.

In total, according to United States and British Intelligence services estimates, the Wagner Group wields a force of about 50,000 troops, out of which 40,000 (80%) are prisoners.¹⁰²

⁹⁷ Reuters.

⁹⁸ “Russia Mobilizes Reinforcements from Syria and Africa to Ukraine,” Institute for the Study of War, accessed February 10, 2023, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russia-mobilizes-reinforcements-syria-and-africa-ukraine>.

⁹⁹ Guy Faulconbridge, “Putin Says Russia to Use Middle East Volunteer Fighters,” *Reuters*, March 11, 2022, sec. Europe, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/putin-says-volunteers-welcome-help-fight-against-ukrainian-forces-2022-03-11/>.

¹⁰⁰ “Up to 20,000 Mercenaries in Ukraine: European Official - Kyiv Post - Ukraine’s Global Voice,” *Kyiv Post*, April 20, 2022, <https://www.kyivpost.com/ukraine-politics/up-to-20000-mercenaries-in-ukraine-european-official.html>.

¹⁰¹ Lynne O’Donnell, “Russia’s Recruiting Afghan Commandos,” *Foreign Policy* (blog), October 25, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/10/25/afghanistan-russia-ukraine-military-recruitment-putin-taliban/>.

¹⁰² Steve Holland, “Exclusive: US Says Russia’s Wagner Group Bought North Korean Weapons for Ukraine War,” *Reuters*, December 22, 2022, sec. World, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-says-russias-wagner-group-bought-north-korean-weapons-ukraine-war-2022-12-22/>.

Training of the Troops

The training of contract Wagner troops takes place mainly at the Molokino site in Krasnodar Krai, however the rapid recruitment of troops from prisons has most likely led to more temporary sites for training popping up, as well as the establishment of new training centers in Belgorod and Kursk Oblasts.¹⁰³ Whereas the contract soldiers might have prior military experience and receive more training time prior to being deployed to the frontlines, the same isn't true for the convict recruits. There have been multiple testimonials that the prisoners are sent to the frontlines with little to no training.¹⁰⁴ Izmailov, in his expose to *Meduza*, told the outlet that he was sent to the frontlines within two weeks of signing the contract with the group.¹⁰⁵ Izmailov stated that 70 out of 90 troops in his platoon were killed, indicating the high casualty rates of the barely-trained soldiers.¹⁰⁶ The UK Ministry of Defense has described this as a strategy of attritional warfare, where the training of the troops is less important than their capacity to overpower positions by sheer quantity.¹⁰⁷ In a similar vein, this has been referenced in the media as using troops as “cannon fodder” and or sending them to the “meat grinder.”

The Use of Wagner Group in Operational Form

The Wagner Group initially started off with a mixed role in the large-scale war, supporting the MOD troops in various capacities, participating in special operations, and filling gaps in the recruitment process as the army soldiers were showing a reluctance in joining Russia's war effort. However, as the war progressed from month-to-month, the role of the Wagner Group became

¹⁰³ “Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 1,” Institute for the Study of War, January 12, 2022, <https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-december-1>.

¹⁰⁴ <https://twitter.com/DefenceHQ/status/1604711619635945472>.

¹⁰⁵ “Ukrainian Telegram channels published an interview with a former prisoner recruited by the Wagner PMC.”

¹⁰⁶ <https://t.me/sashakots/37289>.

¹⁰⁷ <https://twitter.com/DefenceHQ/status/1604711619635945472>.

increasingly important in achieving military objectives, especially in the siege of Bakhmut, which is still on-going at the time of writing. This chapter will review different military achievements of the group as well as on-going objectives and the capacity in which the group has been employed in this conflict, before turning to the political implications of Wagner and Prigozhin's performance.

Reporting on Wagner's role in the early part of the war is relatively limited due to the secretive nature of the PMC prior to Prigozhin becoming a prominent character in Russia's war effort. It has been reported that the Wagner Group participated in a special operation in Kiev at the beginning of the war with the aim of killing the Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky.¹⁰⁸ Reportedly about 400 mercenaries were employed with that goal.¹⁰⁹

Battles of Popasna, Severodonetsk, and Bakhmut

The Wagner Group was also significantly involved in the siege of Popasna. The battle for Popasna took place from mid-March until the beginning of May. Drone footage from the later parts of the battle was released, showing troops with Wagner insignias in close quarter battles in the city, indicating the group's role in heading the assault.¹¹⁰ Shared media from the city also shows Wagner's banners attached to buildings. Libyan mercenaries associated with Wagner were also found dead in Popasna, indicating the presence of foreign mercenaries in Eastern Ukraine.¹¹¹ From Popasna, the Wagner troops moved towards Severodonetsk.

The battle for Severodonetsk took place from early May until late June. Together with Lysychansk, the cities were the last strongholds of the Ukrainian Army in the Luhansk Oblast,

¹⁰⁸ "The Wagner PMC began wide recruitment of mercenaries for the war with Ukraine. They take everyone.," BBC News Русская служба, March 11, 2022, <https://bbc.global.ssl.fastly.net/russian/news-60692632>.

¹⁰⁹ "The Wagner PMC began wide recruitment of mercenaries for the war with Ukraine. They take everyone."

¹¹⁰ <https://twitter.com/RALee85/status/1521608241213579265>.

¹¹¹ "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 20," Institute for the Study of War, April 20, 2022, 20, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-april-20>.

with Severodonetsk being the administrative center for the unoccupied areas prior to the war. The Wagner Group reported provided the main offensive force for the capture of the city together with Rosgvardia (Russian National Guard), although the latter is not meant to be a frontline infantry unit.¹¹² The capture of the city, spearheaded by Wagner forces, led to the change of tactical use of Wagner troops in the war. This became most evident in the siege of Bakhmut.

The siege of Bakhmut is one of the longest on-going offensives in the war and has become a focal point for power projection and use of Wagner troops. As noted above, the Wagner Group had a significant role in capturing cities around Bakhmut, such as Klynove, Novoluhanske, Pokrovske and the Vuhlehirska Power Plant.¹¹³ This made it possible for the Wagner forces alongside regular Russian forces to attack the city. The siege of Bakhmut started August 1, 2022, with ground attacks from the South and Southeast of the city. The siege of the city has been slow, due to the difficulty of urban warfare and the prior establishment of defensive positions by the Ukrainian Army. In October 2022, Prigozhin claimed that Wagner troops were advancing about 100-200 meters per day, which he claimed was normal for modern warfare.¹¹⁴ In an interview to RIA Novosti, Prigozhin claimed that the rate of advance had become very slow and the battle attritional, due to there being multiple defensive lines within the city and every building being like a fortress.¹¹⁵

The siege of the areas around Bakhmut are also relevant to the strategies used to make tactical gains. The Wagner Group had been using frontal attacks, attempting to overwhelm

¹¹² “The Wagner PMC began wide recruitment of mercenaries for the war with Ukraine. They take everyone.”

¹¹³ “Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 14,” Institute for the Study of War, August 14, 2022, <http://dev-isw.bivings.com/>.

¹¹⁴ https://t.me/Prigozhin_hat/1867

¹¹⁵ https://t.me/rian_ru/190473

Ukrainian positions, suffering from high levels of attrition.¹¹⁶ Given that most of the Wagner troops are convicts and poorly trained, this indicates the expendability of these troops and the willingness to use brutal tactics to achieve military aims. The high attrition rate of Wagner forces was also shown by *Reuters* when it investigated a Wagner burial site near Bakinskaya village in Krasnodar Krai. Through satellite imagery from mid-November to late January, there appeared an entire cemetery filled up by the graves of Wagnerites.¹¹⁷

The most significant victory for the Russian forces around Bakhmut at the time of writing was the capture of Soledar. The city lies approximately 13 km northeast of Bakhmut and was reportedly being fired at since late July alongside ground operations directed at taking the city.¹¹⁸ Greater success in taking the city and in the Bakhmut area in general started taking place with the intensification of offensive operations by Wagner troops late December and early January.¹¹⁹ Furthermore, it was reported on the December 27, 2022, that VDV forces were conducting joint operations in the Bakhmut area with Wagner, which indicates a change in tactics, given that Wagner had been claiming sole responsibility for offensive actions in the sector.¹²⁰ The Russian MOD declared the capture of Soledar on January 13, 2023, but attributed the victory only to Russian Armed Forces, creating controversy in the Russian military blogger space due to the

¹¹⁶ “Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 28,” Institute for the Study of War, December 28, 2022, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-december-28>.

¹¹⁷ “A Russian Graveyard Reveals Wagner’s Prisoner Army,” *Reuters*, January 26, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/ukraine-crisis-russia-graves-wagner/>.

¹¹⁸

<https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbid03499mZd3HCFBPbhYfDd6tWLDBhfDPWiqotVTQrkLmi2AUEWQ2MJQ5ayWZZw9tTps7l>.

¹¹⁹ “Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 27,” Institute for the Study of War, December 27, 2022, <https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-december-27>.

¹²⁰ “Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 28,” Institute for the Study of War, December 28, 2022, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-december-28>.

failure to acknowledge the role of Wagner troops.¹²¹ This created a specific tension between the MOD and Wagner, which is analyzed in the next chapter.

The capture of Soledar itself had relatively small strategic relevance in the larger scheme of the war, with the exception of opening up an axis to advance from the northern direction towards Krasna Hora, which the Wagner forces claimed to capture on January 12, 2023, as well as opening a line towards Bakhmut.¹²² As of the time of writing in April 2023, Wagner troops are still actively engaged in the siege of Bakhmut, alongside elite units of the Russian Armed Forces using advanced urban infiltration tactics.¹²³

The culmination of Wagner's efforts seemed to occur in January 2023, given the high attrition rates and brutal tactics. In addition, the Russian Armed Forces have been taking a more significant role in offensive operations since the beginning of February 2023, and will likely continue doing so as the war progresses. Prigozhin has been able to leverage the Wagner Group to his political and reputational advantage due to their advances in the previous months, a topic discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

Wagner's Recruitment Advantage

In order to assess how the Wagner Group fits into the wider context of the war as an extension of Russian Armed Forces and the political implications for Russia, it is necessary first to consider Wagner's recruiting methods. Wagner's recruiting methods were important for three

¹²¹ "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 13, 2023," Institute for the Study of War, January 13, 2023, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-january-13-2023>.

¹²² Reuters, "Wagner Founder Prigozhin Says Russian Forces Take Ukraine Village Krasna Hora, North of Bakhmut," *Reuters*, February 12, 2023, sec. World, <https://www.reuters.com/world/wagner-founder-prigozhin-says-russian-forces-take-ukraine-village-krasna-hora-2023-02-12/>.

¹²³ "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 11, 2023," Institute for the Study of War, February 11, 2023, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-february-11-2023>.

reasons. First, their methods help fill the gaps in Russian military's recruiting efforts, allowing the Kremlin to avoid a general mobilization. Second, these methods allowed the Kremlin to study non-traditional recruiting methods for force generation. Third, the Kremlin could consider the possible repercussions of using powerful armed militias and the extent to which they could be controlled.

Russia's military force generation has been a persistent problem throughout the war. This is partly expected, as the conflict was supposed to be a short intervention into Ukraine lasting around ten days, with the aim of decapitating Kiev and installing a more Kremlin friendly regime. However, as the 'Special Military Operation' turned into a conventional war, the forces ready for immediate use by the Kremlin were insufficient for a full scale of invasion of a country the size of Ukraine. Even as the Kremlin's emphasis changed from taking the whole country at once to seizing the Donbass and consolidating control in the captured areas, not enough people were signing up as volunteers for the Russian Armed Forces. This is where Wagner was able to step in and alleviate the manpower problems of the army and provide the Kremlin with an alternative channel for force generation.

Wagner's forces have certain features. While some of the troops were experienced soldiers who were redeployed from different conflict zones and contributed to the quality of forces, others lacked experience. Moreover, rather than being conscripted, the Wagner Group soldiers voluntarily signed up for their service and thus were potentially more motivated than soldiers sent to the frontlines from the regular army. All of this being said, these advantages apply only to Wagner soldiers who were recruited from outside the prisons and who made up approximately 20% or 10,000 of Wagner's forces.¹²⁴

¹²⁴ Holland, "Exclusive."

Some soldiers came from prisons, however. From July onwards, the Wagner Group was allowed to start recruitment drives from Russian prisons, which greatly increased its force generation capacity and, by proxy, filled in the gaps of the traditional armed forces. This coincided with the relative success of the Wagner forces in the battles for Popasna and Lysychansk, which arguably made it easier for Wagner to sign up troops as Wagner's reputation had grown. Furthermore, the Wagner Group was able to provide contracts that had pardon clauses within them. This gave the convicts a way to significantly reduce their sentences in turn for serving with Wagner for six months, assuming they survived the fighting in Donbass.¹²⁵ The recruiting drive from prisons can be considered a Russian success story, as it significantly increased the number of troops fighting on the Russian side.

However, the autonomy of Wagner in conducting this recruitment drive and its general tactics served the Russian government's interests in complex ways. First, although the Wagner Group has been operating around the world and supporting Russia's foreign policy aims for close to a decade, the group didn't have authority for completely autonomous decision-making. As mentioned earlier, mercenary groups are illegal in Russia and thus their operations and recruitment authorizations must come from the Kremlin and or from the Ministry of Defense. This means that the permission to recruit from prisons also had to come from the Kremlin. Furthermore, only the President has the right to pardon prisoners, which means that the authorization for clemency in Wagner's contracts must have secured the President's approval. But this raises a question as to why the Kremlin didn't just recruit prisoners straight to the armed forces?

¹²⁵ <https://twitter.com/DefenceHQ/status/1638068626761580544?s=20>

One potential reason for this could be the aim of not damaging the image of the Russian Armed Forces. Although the promise of clemency would have most likely been a sufficient motivator for prisoners to join either military structure, recruiting them to Wagner allows for the army to deny affiliation in the case that the prisoners commit crimes. This is important to note, as murderers and people charged with sexual crimes were allowed to join the Wagner Group. Furthermore, many of the recruited prisoners were diagnosed with diseases like hepatitis-C and AIDS, which could threaten the health of the Russian soldiers. Having these soldiers in separate military structures allows for the blame for any criminal behavior to be shifted solely to Wagner and thus wouldn't reflect as poorly on the armed forces.

Another potential reason for using Wagner for the recruitment from prisons is the difference in military strategies used for conquering territory. Wagner has used brutal tactics to achieve its military objectives, sending soldiers into battle head on with the aim of overwhelming the opponent and over running their positions. This has led to very high casualty rates among the Wagner troops. The White House estimated in mid-February that Wagner had suffered more than 30,000 casualties since the beginning of war, with around 9,000 killed in action.¹²⁶ Furthermore, half of these deaths occurred after mid-December and consisted 90% of convict soldiers.¹²⁷ This coincides with the intensification of the fighting in Bakhmut, with fighting in the area starting late July.

The use of so-called 'meatgrinder' tactics would be very difficult to justify for the armed forces and would most likely face strong backlash from the domestic military community and populace. Having Wagner face the brunt of the fighting and consequently, the majority of

¹²⁶ "Russia's Wagner Fighters Suffer 30,000 Casualties in Ukraine: US," accessed April 1, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/2/18/russias-wagner-forces-suffered-30000-casualties-in-ukraine-us>.

¹²⁷ "Russia's Wagner Fighters Suffer 30,000 Casualties in Ukraine."

casualties allows the armed forces to save face as well as claim success in the Russian domestic media space in the case of success. This was the case in Soledar, where the Wagner forces did most of the fighting and suffered most of the casualties, but publicly the Ministry of Defense (MoD) and the Armed Forces received most of the recognition for the success with Putin initially leaving out Wagner from the recognition completely.

Finally, the recruitment from prisons could have been permitted by the MoD as a means to test the effectiveness of this tactic in bolstering the Russian Armed Forces. Indeed, reports have emerged that since the Wagner Group stopped recruiting from prisons on February 11, the MoD has started recruiting from prisons too.¹²⁸ On February 14, 2023, CNN reported that captured convict soldiers were claiming to be employed by the MoD rather than Wagner.¹²⁹ Furthermore, this indicates that the Russian MoD started recruiting from prisons before Prigozhin was forced to stop. Furthermore, it was reported that the captured soldiers were assigned to a unit identified just by a series of numbers and were operating under the Luhansk Separatist Army, while used in the same capacity as under Wagner – as stormtroopers.¹³⁰ The fact that the convicts were assigned to a Luhansk unit, rather than a Russian army unit operating in the area seems to reify the notion that the Russian Armed Forces are still attempting to distance themselves from the use of convicts as soldiers.

¹²⁸ *WarGonzo* | *Пригожин и Пегов. Большой Разговор*, accessed April 1, 2023, <https://dzen.ru/video/watch/63e67fbd7270fb396dc1e99d>.

¹²⁹ CNN's Nick Paton Walsh Featherstone Darya Tarasova and Jo Shelley Video by Oscar, "Exclusive: Russian Convicts Say Defense Ministry Is Sending Them from Jail to Fight as 'cannon Fodder' in Ukraine," CNN, accessed April 2, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/02/14/europe/russian-army-prisoners-conscripts-ukraine-intl/index.html>.

¹³⁰ Featherstone.

The Political Implications of Prigozhin's Increased Visibility and Popularity

There is a competing explanation for why Wagner's recruitment from prisons has been restricted, that the Kremlin and MoD have been purposefully taking action in order to undermine the authority and power of Prigozhin. This newly gained power is perceived as a challenge to the authority of the Kremlin and the armed forces and has been used by Prigozhin for economic and political leverage. In order to understand this newly emerged dynamic between the Kremlin and Prigozhin it is important to contextualize the rivalries that Prigozhin has created and how he changed from a figure operating outside the law and hidden from the public to one of the most recognized figures in the war.

Arguably the most interesting dynamic that emerged from Wagner's participation in the war effort was the growing tension between Prigozhin and different members of the Russian political and military elite, such as Defense Minister Shoigu, Commander of the Central Military District, Alexander Lapin, and the Mayor of St. Petersburg, Alexander Beglov. I argue that Wagner's partial successes gave Prigozhin the power to undermine and challenge these figures of authority. However, the perception of Prigozhin as a threat and Wagner's limited success in the Donbass, the influence of Prigozhin has recently declined and may be actively suppressed by the Kremlin.

The emergence of Prigozhin as a public figure coincided with the successes of Wagner on battlefield. Although supposedly involved since the early days of the conflict, the in-depth coverage of the Wagner Group didn't start until after its success at Popasna and Severodonetsk, where, the Wagner Group spearheaded the attack. The success of the Wagner Group on the battlefield coincided with the force generation problems of the Russian Army, although reports of the latter emerged as far back as in spring of 2022. When Wagner started its siege of Bakhmut in

August, the Russian conventional forces were losing thousands of square kilometers of ground to Ukrainian forces in the Kharkiv and Kherson regions, pushing Wagner to the forefront. The coverage of the group skyrocketed when a video of Prigozhin recruiting prisoners to Wagner emerged in early September. Two weeks later he publicly recognized his leadership of the group.

In August and September, filling in the recruitment gaps of the Russian Armed Forces was becoming increasingly common, as Wagner offered much more lucrative contracts and Russia had not yet declared full mobilization. Consequently, Prigozhin's emergence as a public figure comfortably coincided with the shortcomings of the Armed Forces and successes of Wagner. Military bloggers as well as Russian officials, most notably Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, started to call out the Russian army for putting up a façade of a successful military operation and denying the success of the Ukrainian counteroffensive in the Kharkiv region.¹³¹ The persistent criticisms of the MoD strengthened the image of Prigozhin and presented him as an alternative to the conventional military command.

Prigozhin used this newly gained influence and public image to better his own standing in Russian political society as well as to influence Wagner's capacities on the battlefield. Prigozhin and Kadyrov repeatedly called out the Commander of the Central Military District, Alexander Lapin, for failing to defend captured areas, most notably Lyman, and for not being invested in the success of the Russian forces in Ukraine.¹³² Prigozhin's as well as Kadyrov's comments were supported by the military blogger community. It seems the Kremlin was responsive to the criticisms of the Russian nationalists, which includes Kadyrovites, Prigozhin, and some of the military blogger community, as Lapin was released from duty in late October as the Commander

¹³¹ "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 11," Institute for the Study of War, accessed March 20, 2023, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-september-11>.

¹³² https://t.me/Prigozhin_hat/1740; https://t.me/Prigozhin_hat/1884.

of the Central Military District. This indicates that they had gained some leverage with the Kremlin.¹³³

The release of Lapin was the first change of a military district commander since Army General Sergei Surovikin took over as the Commander of the Russian Operation in Ukraine on October 8, 2022. Interestingly, whereas Prigozhin had been highly critical of a lot of the Russian military command, he had only high praise for General Surovikin, going as far as calling him “legendary” and the “best commander in the army.”¹³⁴ This might have been a strategic move from the part of Prigozhin in order to create a close relationship with the theatre commander with the aim of ensuring the provision of heavy artillery and ammunitions to the Wagner soldiers fighting in Bakhmut. Indeed, in December, the Chief of the Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Kyrylo Budanov reported that Prigozhin and Surovikin had formed an alliance and were both rivals of Russian Defense Minister Shoigu.¹³⁵ When Surovikin was replaced as the Commander of the Russian Forces by Valery Gerasimov, artillery provisions for Wagner soldiers dried up. Prigozhin admitted that he had received military aid from unnamed generals, who had to break military code to assist them. Due to difficult relationships with command however, the provisions had become limited.¹³⁶ More than likely, this difficult relationship that Prigozhin references is his relationship with Shoigu.

This conflict between the MoD and Prigozhin has been brewing since May 2022. Prigozhin was able to use the failures of the armed forces and successes of Wagner to criticize the

¹³³ Neil MacFarquhar and Cassandra Vinograd, “Russia Names a New Commander for the War in Ukraine.,” *The New York Times*, October 8, 2022, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/08/world/europe/russia-ukraine-general-sergei-surovikin.html>.

¹³⁴ https://t.me/Prigozhin_hat/1793

¹³⁵ Andrew E. Kramer, “Threat of Invasion From Belarus Low, Says Ukraine Spy Chief,” *The New York Times*, December 23, 2022, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/23/world/europe/belarus-ukraine-invasion-threat.html>.

¹³⁶ https://t.me/concordgroup_official/473

conventional forces' war effort without any real repercussions. This was also due to Wagner offering a much politically safer alternative for the Russian government for recruitment and force accumulation than mass mobilization, even though a partial mobilization was still called in September 2022. Wagner-affiliated military bloggers began to defame Minister Shoigu and the MoD for not being able to sustain momentum from the capture of Lysychansk and Severodonetsk and the ultra-nationalist community rallied behind Prigozhin and Wagner.¹³⁷ This popularity of Wagner among the ultra-nationalist community, as well as the negative perception of the MoD and unsuccessful recruiting efforts all contributed to the Kremlin permitting Wagner to recruit from Russian prisons.

As mentioned above, Wagner was able to recruit around 40,000-50,000 soldiers from Russian prisons, creating a considerable military force in the process. Although most of the soldiers were convicts and poorly trained, they provided Prigozhin and the Kremlin an exhaustible force, whose deaths were more easily dismissible than those of the soldiers in the Armed Forces. This gave Prigozhin both influence and power, but also positioned him as a potential threat, especially given his rhetoric towards the MoD.

It is this critical rhetoric, his possible political aspirations and his control over a small army that has turned Prigozhin into a threat for the Kremlin. This would explain the Kremlin's actions that have significantly thwarted Prigozhin's power in Russia as well as Wagner's military capacities in Ukraine. One of the ways the Kremlin has done this is through restricting the Wagner Group's recruitment of convicts.

¹³⁷ "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 12, 2023," Institute for the Study of War, accessed March 23, 2023, <https://www.understandingwar.org/background/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-march-12-2023>.

As noted above Wagner stopped recruiting from prisons in February 2023. Given that this was the main way that Wagner was able to sustain the high attritional offensive tactics used in Soledar and Bakhmut, Wagner will have a very hard time continuing the same tactics as they are based mostly on quantity and not quality. This is further exacerbated by the fact that Wagner's contracts were signed for a six-month deployment; meaning that as weeks pass, the size of Wagner's army will decrease significantly. Already the earliest convict recruits have returned to their lives in Russia with Wagner having almost no control to assigning them to any further military action. Prigozhin has tried to counter this loss of troops with opening up additional recruiting centers in Russia with an increased focus on sports and youth clubs, but their effectiveness in recruiting is not yet proven.¹³⁸ Furthermore, given that the Kremlin has intervened in Wagner's recruiting from prisons and largely integrated into its own mechanism of recruitment, it is unclear to what extent Wagner can use this system to mobilize troops to fight in Ukraine again in the future.

Wagner's Declining Power and the Emergence of Parallel Military Structures

Moreover, the Kremlin has been sanctioning the creation of parallel military companies and volunteer units to Wagner, possibly aiming to balance the power and diminish the relevance of Wagner in the Ukrainian war effort. For Example, Putin authorized Gazprom, one of the largest energy companies in Russia, to establish a private security organization with the aim of protecting the company's sites as well as serving anti-terrorism efforts.¹³⁹ Although the company has noted that this is volunteer formation, it is competing with Wagner in its recruitment efforts in the

¹³⁸ "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 2, 2023," Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 2, 2023, accessed April 2, 2023, <https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-march-2-2023>.

¹³⁹ Р. И. А. Новости, "The government allowed Gazprom Neft to create a private security company," РИА Новости, 20230206T2202, <https://ria.ru/20230206/okhrana-1850151290.html>.

occupied areas in the Donetsk Oblast. A military blogger claimed that the salaries provided by the volunteer formation are greater than those provided by Wagner and are thus most likely meant to attract people to join the volunteer unit rather than Wagner, making it more difficult for Wagner to sustain its recruitment efforts.¹⁴⁰

Another example of a parallel military structure like Wagner is the private military company ‘Convoy,’ reportedly started by the Crimean Occupation Head Sergey Aksyonov. However, this structure may be linked to Wagner given that the leader of the Convoy forces is the head of Wagner forces in Africa, Konstantin Pikalov. The formation seems to operate under a different legal framework than Wagner however. Convoy is technically a Russian Combat Reserve of the Country (BARS) unit. This means individual soldiers have signed two contracts: one with the reserve unit itself and the other with the MoD.¹⁴¹ This guarantees state-provided benefits to the soldiers in the case they are killed or wounded during military conflict – benefits that Wagner soldiers are excluded from due to a lack of legality in Russia.¹⁴²

The latter two examples seem to illustrate the attempts by the Kremlin to disempower Wagner, while Wagner looks for alternative methods to get around recruiting restrictions and for Prigozhin to retain influence in Russia. It has yet to be seen whether the forces employed by Gazprom are going to be used in attacking capacity or whether they are just used for the purposes of defense of company-affiliated infrastructure. That being said, these parallel structures increasingly take away from Wagner’s capacities to recruit from the same areas, as Gazprom offers considerably higher payouts for service. On the other hand, the creation of Convoy might be an

¹⁴⁰ <https://t.me/voenkorKotenok/45904>

¹⁴¹ “A New Private Military Company Has Appeared in Crimea,” IStories, accessed April 7, 2023, <https://istories.media/stories/2023/03/23/glava-krima-sozdal-sobstvennyyu-chvk-ona-svyazana-s-yevgeniem-prigozhnim/>.

¹⁴² “A New Private Military Company Has Appeared in Crimea.”

attempt by Prigozhin-affiliated actors to get around the recruiting restriction from prisons and to bolster the recruitment through more conventional channels, even though Convoy is a parallel structure to Wagner itself. The moves by the Kremlin and MoD to sanction the creation of parallel military structures to Wagner might also be seen as an attempt to weaken the monopoly that Wagner had in the PMC sphere in Russia and to diffuse the power that Prigozhin has come to wield over the course of the war. The Kremlin seems to be aware of the benefits of using PMCs in conflicts but also weary of the power that a singular parallel structure like Wagner is capable of wielding.

Convoy isn't the first parallel military structure that Prigozhin has spearheaded besides Wagner. Back in November 2022, Prigozhin opened training centers for people's militias in Kursk and Belgorod oblasts.¹⁴³ These parallel military structures were meant to be independent from those of the Russian military, as well as Wagner, and aimed at the protection of the oblasts from Ukrainian attacks. However, this can most likely be seen as a symbolic move by Prigozhin, as the Ukrainian strategy so far hasn't included ground attacks on Russian territories. Alternatively, the purpose of training and arming the peoples' militias in Kursk and Belgorod could have been for Prigozhin to expand his influence and reputation in Russian political and ultra-nationalist circles. It must be noted that there haven't been any indication of these peoples' militias participating in offensive operations in Ukraine, so it is not possible to draw a connection with Wagner's recruiting efforts and the formation of these militias.

The timing of the formation of these units and the appeals by Prigozhin point towards his use of symbolism and patriotism for increasing his breadth of support. The news of the formation

¹⁴³ https://t.me/concordgroup_official/4;%25C2%25A0

coincided with Russia's Unity Day on November 4. The day is a commemoration of a Russian uprising against the occupation forces of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and stood as a turning point in the Russian-Polish War in the 17th century. In his press statement on the day Prigozhin emphasized the importance of public unity and called for the aspirations of reaching new heights as a Russian State.¹⁴⁴ Somewhat ironically, Prigozhin has also stated that Russia already has everything in order to achieve that, including a strong president, the greatest people on earth, and a cohesive army.¹⁴⁵ Specifically the last point seems to be a dig at the Russian Armed Forces, who had been suffering significant defeats during the Ukrainian fall 2022 counteroffensive. Through all of this Prigozhin seemed to have been positioning himself as a patriotic wartime leader and attempting to increase his popularity in the Russian information space.

Considering these three groups, Gazprom's private militia, Convoy and Kursk and Belgorod oblasts' peoples' militias, the formation of parallel military structures is in fact a strategy employed by both Prigozhin and Kremlin. The Kursk and Belgorod oblasts people's militias were most likely used by Prigozhin in order to increase his influence in the Russian pro-war communities and to establish regional alliances in Russia proper. As mentioned above, the peoples' militias are considered a purely defensive force intended for the protection of Kursk and Belgorod from Ukrainian attacks. Consequently, they can't be used by Prigozhin to bolster Wagner's fighting capacities in the Donbass, even if they are trained by Wagner operatives.

By contrast, Convoy is a Russian Combat Reserve unit, and thus can be mobilized for combat operations. Even though the head of Convoy, Pikalov, is affiliated with Wagner, it is yet to be seen whether the grouping will be controlled indirectly by Prigozhin and used as an

¹⁴⁴ https://t.me/Prigozhin_hat/1971

¹⁴⁵ https://t.me/Prigozhin_hat/1971

alternative venue for recruitment under the umbrella of a parallel structure to Wagner. Given the fact that Wagner is not able to recruit from prisons anymore and is facing manpower shortages due to the highly attritional tactics used in their offensives, Convoy's favorable contracts with the MoD and the grouping might offer a promising alternative to Wagner as well as to the Russian Armed Forces.¹⁴⁶ The extent of the control that Prigozhin or the MoD has over the grouping has yet to be seen, but in any consideration, its creation has a diluting effect on Wagner specifically.

Finally, the private security company created by Gazprom and sanctioned by the Kremlin, seems to be a direct effort by the Kremlin to diminish the capacities of Wagner. The grouping offers even higher salaries than Wagner or Convoy and is directly competing with Wagner in recruiting in the Donetsk area. Furthermore, its creation is sanctioned by the Kremlin, as the decree for its creation was authorized by Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin according to the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense.¹⁴⁷ Although created ostensibly for the purposes of protection of fuel and energy facilities, the Ministry of Defense reports this to be a deliberate action by the Kremlin and a type of arms race between Prigozhin and other actors in the Kremlin.¹⁴⁸

A couple of further inferences can be made from this race among parallel military structures. First, these bodies are useful to the Kremlin and are most likely to remain a part of its foreign policy toolbox. Secondly, there will most likely be attempts to de-monopolize the segment in fear of losing central control over actors.

¹⁴⁶ "New Russian Militia Convoy Rises as Wagner Group Gets Too Big to Control," France 24, April 8, 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20230408-new-russian-militia-convoy-rises-as-wagner-group-gets-too-big-to-control>.

¹⁴⁷ "Russian 'Gazprom' Creates Its Own Private Military Company," accessed April 7, 2023, <https://gur.gov.ua/en/content/hazprom-stvoriuie-vlasnu-pryvatnu-viiskovu-kompaniiu.html>.

¹⁴⁸ "Russian 'Gazprom' Creates Its Own Private Military Company."

The Kremlin's use of the Wagner Group specifically has enjoyed some success. The group has contributed to most of the successes on the battlefield since the beginning of war in Ukraine. When the Russian Army had considerable difficulties in recruiting, Wagner was able to fill the void by offering more competitive salaries than the army. It also used unconventional recruiting methods that were not yet open to the armed forces – even though it seems that the Army has now started recruiting from prisons as well. Furthermore, Wagner was able to employ highly attritional military tactics and bore the brunt of the casualties in the recent offensives in the Donbass. These casualties should have fewer negative effects on public opinion. After all, Wagnerites have made the decision to join the fighting in Ukraine by their own volition rather than being forced to fight by the Kremlin through a partial mobilization or as regular service to the Armed Forces. While there are other benefits of other Wagner operations around the world, these ones pertain specifically to the war in Ukraine.

Furthermore, the creation of parallel military structures is not the only method that the Kremlin has used in order to weaken the Wagner Group and to reign in Prigozhin. The Kremlin has also resorted to increasing reliance on conventional armed forces and attempted to reform the military to better achieve its aims. Additionally, the Kremlin has diminished and, in some cases, completely stepped away from recognizing Wagner's contributions to military successes. Finally, the use of meat grinder tactics with a lack of support from the conventional forces might be an indication that the MoD is purposefully allowing for very high attrition rates in order to weaken the Wagner forces.

The most significant change in Russia's military war effort was the change of the theatre commander from Surovikin to Army General Gerasimov. As noted above, Surovikin had a good relationship with Prigozhin and provided him with necessary equipment and fire support for

offensive operation. However, Prigozhin's constant criticisms of the MoD, specifically Defense Minister Shoigu, and the armed forces, had created serious tensions between Wagner and the conventional forces. During fall of 2022, when the army and the MoD were dealing with the new forces from the partial mobilization and conscription, it seems that Putin gave Prigozhin and Surovikin a chance to prove themselves.¹⁴⁹ However, neither of the actors had any considerable impact on the war effort. At the time of writing in April 2023, Wagner is still fighting for control of Bakhmut and Surovikin was replaced by Gerasimov on January 11, 2023. An additional three deputies were appointed to work with Gerasimov on the tasks associated with the "special military operation," indicating a greater focus on the conventional forces for prosecuting the war.¹⁵⁰

The Kremlin has also moved away from giving as much recognition to Wagner's achievements, with the likely goal of attributing more of the success to the conventional forces and diminishing the perception of an over reliance on Wagner. This was especially notable after the capture of Soledar, when the MoD put out an initial press statement that did not include any credit for Wagner in the effort to take the city, only to publish a follow-up statement on January 13, 2023 that assigned limited credit to irregular forces.¹⁵¹ Furthermore, although the most known feud was between the MoD and Prigozhin, even President Putin's public statement on January 15, 2023 had no mention of Wagner or Prigozhin.¹⁵² The decision not to recognize the Wagner Group was most likely a deliberate choice in order to help repair the damaged reputation of the armed

¹⁴⁹ "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 22, 2023," Institute for the Study of War, 2, accessed April 8, 2023, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-january-22-2023>.

¹⁵⁰ "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 15, 2023," Institute for the Study of War, accessed April 8, 2023, <https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-january-15-2023>.

¹⁵¹ "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 22, 2023."

¹⁵² https://t.me/smotrim_ru/17276

forces among the general public and weaken the perception of Russia's over reliance on the Wagner Group.

Conclusion

The Wagner Group has provided substantial support to the Russian Armed Forces both in terms of offensive capabilities and manpower generation. Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that the MoD has started emulating the recruitment tactics of Wagner in the Donbass, indicating the value of the tactic to the Russian government. In addition, Prigozhin's influence through Wagner seemingly led to the changes in military leadership during the course of the war with General Surovikin taking over the command of the war theatre in October 2022.

However, it seems that the Kremlin also became cautious about the power that Wagner might wield and therefore decided to break the monopoly that Wagner held in the Russian parallel military structure space. One of the ways that the Kremlin has done this is through permitting or sanctioning the creation of other structures, such as Convoy or the Gazprom security service, that directly compete with Wagner for recruits by offering more lucrative contracts. The logic may be that a small number of professional structures allows for the completion of desired objectives without any one structure becoming too powerful and using that newly acquired power to challenge the Russian state or undermine the armed forces. Furthermore, the Kremlin has denied Wagner the chance to recruit from Russian prisons and has underplayed the importance of Wagner's contribution in key battles, like those in Popasna. These all seem to indicate the deliberate weakening of Wagner by the Kremlin and an recognition of a threat that a parallel military structure such as Wagner can impose for domestic stability if permitted too much autonomy.

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