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Russia's "Private" Military Companies: The Example of the Wagner Group

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Key Messages

- “The Wagner Group” is a name, *not a traditional organization*.
- Wagner is *not a “private military company”* and is *not mercenary*:
 - It is a *semi-state security actor*.
- It has become a Russian tool throughout Africa.
 - *New model*: support a particular leader, in return for raw materials access.

Why Russia Uses “Private Military Companies” Is *Not* a Mystery: Same as Other Countries

- Saves state budget resources.
- Adds skill sets to regular troops.
- Provides **plausible deniability** for state actions.
- **Avoids casualties** for regular troops
 - Ivan Safranchuk (MGIMO and CSIS): “proxy warfare”



Yet There are Three Mysteries about the Wagner Group:



- **Mystery #1:** Whatever happened to Dmitry Utkin (Mr. “Wagner”)?
- **Mystery #2:** Why is the Wagner Group illegal in Russia?
- **Mystery #3:** Why is Putin interested in sub-Saharan Africa, including the Central African Republic (CAR)?



The Wagner Group

emerged in Ukraine, 2014/15


- Immediate predecessor: the Slavonic Corps (Syria).
- Commander **Dmitry Utkin**: a **GRU spetsnaz** veteran with the *nom de guerre* “Wagner.”
 - He wore a Wehrmacht steel helmet.
- They participated in:
 - Fighting in eastern Ukraine (Donbas).
 - Infighting among pro-Russian militias in eastern Ukraine.



The Wagner Group





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- Cooperated in combat with Russian forces in Syria (2015/16).
- **Dmitry Utkin** received a Kremlin medal for bravery in December 2016. 
 - ...but has not been seen publicly since.
 - Named the head of Concord Management and Consulting (a Prigozhin firm), Nov. 2017.
- **We don't have an answer to Mystery #1.**

Wagner is Illegal in Russia



- The state refused to legalize PMCs, March 2018.
 - They are technically “unconstitutional.”
- Yet:
 - Wagner trains in Krasnodar (Molkino) next to **GRU** special forces.
 - Utkin received that Kremlin medal. 
 - Some Wagner dead were buried with military honors. 
 - Putin on Wagner, Dec. 2018:
 - “If they comply with Russian law, they have every right to work and promote their business interests anywhere in the world.”




Why are Russian choices puzzling?

- Many powerful states use PMCs.
- But all other major powers have recognized them as legal contractors.
- Most are parties to the 2008 ICRC Montreux Accord.
 - Even China was an original signatory.



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Why Are PMCs Illegal in Russia?

- Most common answer: plausible deniability.
 - Becoming less “plausible” with time. 
- Some Russian analysts: to prevent a coup?
 - Unlikely: relative size of forces.
- My argument:
 - Illegality is a form of control.
 - Illegality limits the market to Putin’s friends.



Two Examples: The Russian State Did Not Protect “Wagner” in Eastern Syria

- The **Slavonic Corps**: 2013.
 - Veterans were recruited by an **FSB** reserve officer.
 - Leaders were arrested as “mercenaries” by the **FSB**!
- Firefight with US special forces, Feb. 2018.
 - Russian **Defense Ministry** disowned them.
 - Flown home on Russian **military** airplanes...
 - but the **Defense Ministry** would not send helicopters to evacuate them from the battlefield.
- Yet: both Deir-el-Zour gasfield contracts were probably reached via the **Russian energy ministry**.



Alexander Novak

2016: Wagner's Primary Contractor is revealed: **Yevgeny Prigozhin**

- Spent 9 years in Soviet prison for organized crime (**got out early**).
- Started a sausage kiosk in St. Petersburg (**Putin in mayor's office**).
- Turned it into a successful St. Petersburg restaurant chain.
- Became the primary caterer for the Kremlin (**Putin in the Kremlin**).
- Became the primary caterer for Russian public schools.
- Became the primary food and cleaning contractor for the Russian military.



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February 2018 Syria Disaster

- Why did Russia allow those veterans to go to their doom?
- Could not have been miscommunication: the battle had 2 phases and lasted 4 hours.
- Was it a test of US military mettle?
- Or was it infighting between Prigozhin and the Russian Defense Ministry?
 - Prigozhin is an ex-con with no military experience.
 - He was an oligarch interloper in the Russian battle space (uniformed military vs. PMCs).
 - He was known to cheat the Defense Ministry: major 2017 contract disputes.

“Wagner” in the Central African Republic (CAR)



- Dec. 2017: Wagner guarded **weapons** Russia brought in with UN Security Council approval.
- 2018: Pres. Touadéra accepted Valery Zakharov (former **GRU** officer) as his **security advisor**.
 - Zakharov may have been paid by Prigozhin and lives on Prigozhin property (CNN investigation).
- Wagner is **training** CAR special operations forces.
 - The first cadre graduated in May 2019.
 - *Not* integrated with **UN MINUSCA** or **EU** training programs.
- Russian troops and weapons have increased over time.



Meanwhile...

- Prigozhin has deals with:
 - CAR to guard its **diamond and gold mines**, in return for a cut of the profits...
 - **Sudan** to provide training, and **guard its gold mines** in return for a cut of the profits.
- All of these mines are **artisanal**.



Kimberly Marten, April 2020



Also meanwhile...



- **Zakharov** and **Prigozhin** helped rebel militias in CAR mining areas negotiate a peace deal with Touadéra (done in Sudan).
- This jump-started (but also sidelined) the UN MINUSCA/African Union process.
- Rebels got positions in government and defense forces with inadequate vetting (ICG).
- Russia may be testing a new **model of indispensable influence**.
 - May not be working.
- Is Prigozhin making any money?

2020: Russia Rotates in as Chair of the “Kimberley Process”



- UN-mandated trade regime for certifying rough diamonds as “conflict-free.”
- CAR was allowed to reenter in 2015...
 - But only 8 districts in CAR are approved.
 - One, **Boda**, has *some* Prigozhin contracts.
- Russian **Deputy Finance Minister** Aleksei Moiseev: Russia wants to get *all* of CAR approved.
 - Moiseev also chairs the strategic planning board of **Alrosa**.
- Meanwhile, is Prigozhin engaged in money laundering using diamonds? (Arnaud Kalika, IFRI)
- Could he also be engaged in “diamond laundering”?



By 2019, “Wagner” is also in:

- **Libya**: supporting warlord Khalifa Haftar.
- **Mozambique**: fighting jihadist insurgency in Cabo Delgado (may now have withdrawn).
- **Mali**: fighting terrorism.
- Back in **Syria**? New gas and oil contracts.



Prigozhin and **Media** in Africa



- He operates a radio station in CAR.
- His fake social media accounts are attempting political influence in 8 African countries (Shelby Grossman and team at the Stanford Internet Observatory, Oct. 2019)
- He has launched campaigns to discredit French forces as “neo-colonial.”
 - Obvious lies about the French have been repeated in the UN Security Council by Russia’s Vasily Nebenzya (**Foreign Ministry**).
 - Yet France and Russia are important natural gas business partners in both the Russian Arctic, and the Nord Stream II European pipeline.