

Secret Warfare:

Wagner Group and the Clandestine Projection of State Power

By Phillip Chao

In Bangui, the capital of the impoverished inland nation the Central African Republic (CAR), an envoy of military-style armored vehicles roamed through the bustling city streets, carrying a squadron of soldiers in unmarked camel suits who taunted the rifles in their hands and chattered with one another in Russian or other Eastern European dialects.¹ Their arrival marked the Kremlin's effort to prop up the vulnerable regime of President Faustin-Archange Touadéré, a regional ally whose political legitimacy was undermined by allegations of corruption, election frauds, and an ongoing civil war against Jihadists and Fulani insurgents.² While these soldiers of fortune came into occasional conflicts with UN peacekeepers and were criticized for their use of indiscriminate violence and summary executions, they nevertheless played a vital role in preserving Touadéré's rule, as they regained most of the regions lost to the Coalition of Patriots for Change (CPC) and other rebel groups, and received praises from many Central Africans for restoring the public order in a country plagued by decades of unrest.³

Birth of the Wagner Group

The Central Africa Republic is just one of the many combat zones in which the Wagner Group, a clandestine paramilitary force, served as an effective extension of Russian state power and advanced its overseas interests. A private organization with close ties to the Russian Ministry of Defense, military intelligence units, and President Vladimir Putin, the Wagner Group has distinguished itself from civilian contractors like G4S in the UK or Constellis Group in the US. Emphasizing less on winning defense contracts or maximizing commercial gains, the group successfully orients itself as Russia's bridgehead in reclaiming global influence. The Wagner Group places specific emphasis on protecting natural resources and trading routes vital to the Russian economy and providing stability for regimes that aligned themselves with the Kremlin. Although the Wagner group also recruits foreign veterans and deploys them in low-intensity missions overseas, their members are nevertheless non-state combatants and do not wear identifiable uniforms and insignia, which distinguishes them from state-sponsored military units like the French Foreign Legion. In this way, the Wagner Group's deployment may effectively evade the scrutiny of the international community and reduce the possibility of domestic and international backlash. The creation, rise, and transformation of the Wagner Group thus reflect the shift and changes in the need for power projection of the Russian state, longing to reclaim its former glory and protect its global influences

while minimizing the risks of international criticism and domestic discontent.



Illustration by Joyce Wang

The birth of the Wagner Group coincided with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, which not only signaled the disintegration of its global influence but also marked the downfall of its immense military force. Boris Yeltsin, Putin's predecessor, subsequently adopted the "shock therapy" measures—a series of reforms including rapid privatization, relinquishment of price control, and trade liberalization—to revitalize the dormant economy of the newly formed Russian Federation. Inflation soared at unprecedented rates, weakening the economy such that Russia could no longer sustain the upkeep of weaponries and the pensions of their soldiers. This resulted in swift moves to shrink the size of the army and retire excess soldiers and equipment, creating a pool of unemployed veterans in former CIS countries who had ample active combat experiences but lacked a stable source of income. The availability of well-trained personnel, combined with the lack of regulations on mercenary activities, provided the perfect breeding ground for private military companies. During the separatist insurgencies in Georgia and Moldova in the 1990s, mercenaries from all parts of the former Soviet Union joined both sides of the conflict until Russia sent in its own military forces to ensure the de facto independence of the irredentist regions.⁴ The abundance of skilled former soldiers and the need for the new Russian federation to maintain its overseas presence, despite a limited military budget and strict international securities, paved the path for the creation of private mercenary corps. The Moran Security Group was just one of the groups that emerged from such turmoils, accumulating its wealth through operating armed envoys for Russian firms in Syria and other battle-torn regions. Seizing on the rising demand for private military personnel in the Middle East, two former employees of the Moran Security Group formed the Slavonic Corps, a more radical group

that extended their operations beyond low-intensity security missions and formed active combat contingents. After suffering a sound defeat in Syria at the hands of the Islamic State, the Slavonic Corps was disbanded and soon succeeded by the Wagner Group, a mercenary organization that is even less so commercially oriented and more aligned with the Russian state interest. Unlike the Slavonic Corps, which relied on the Syrian Government for logistical support and had to purchase their own weaponries, the Wagner Group came under the direct funding and support of the Russian State. Through military-grade training and access to intelligence, the Wagner Group transformed from a conventional Private Military and Security Company (PMSC) to a professional assault force loyal to the Kremlin's command.⁵

Wagner Group as a Key Actor of the Russian Military

After the collapse of the USSR, the Russian military forces, despite inheriting the majority of its nuclear and conventional arsenals, were corrupt, inefficient, and understaffed, relying on outdated weaponries and an overly robust command structure which led to its poor performance in Chechnya and Georgia. One-fourth of the Russian Army was made up of conscript soldiers, who only served a short period of time, lacked proper training or combat experience, and were prohibited from overseas deployment by the Russian Constitution.⁶ If soldiers of the regular army died in combat missions, their families would also be entitled to life-long pensions and other compensations. The contracted mercenaries thus emerged as a popular and cost-efficient alternative, solving the personnel shortage in the Russian Army while helping to curb criticisms by family back home. It also provided a legal leeway for the Russian government to interfere in regional conflicts around the globe without officially declaring war. Since the foundation of the Wagner Group, it has mainly engaged in ambiguous warfare in developing countries. It defended the Assad Regime in the Syrian Civil War against the Islamic State, Kurdish militants, and other rebel groups. It engaged the Fulani rebel forces in the Central African Republic on behalf of President Touadère, protected the oil-rich coastal provinces of Mozambique, and participated in General Khalifa Haftar's assault on the Government of National Accord in Libya.⁷ Their international presence, despite provoking some scrutiny by international relations scholars, received little publicity on popular news outlets back home and in Western Countries, enabling the Russian government to obscure their ties to the aforementioned conflicts while lowering domestic social costs. Through these operations, Russian PMSCs like the Wagner Group were able to protect key infrastructure and trading routes closely associated with Russian overseas business interests in West Africa, East Africa, and the Middle East, further advancing the strategic goals of the Russian state.

The command structure, availability of resources, and mode of operation of the Wagner Group separated itself

from conventional PMSCs in Europe and America as well as state-sponsored military units like the French Foreign Legion, which ensured their secrecy and undetectability in conflicts that the Russian Federation was not formally involved in. The group and its combat operations are actively administered and overseen by Yevgeny Prigozhin, Putin's private chef and Kremlin's exclusive banquet caterer. He led the umbrella organization known as Concord Management and Consulting which combined the catering businesses with his mercenary endeavors. Aside from being a tycoon in the food industry, Prigozhin is also closely associated with the Russian ministry of defense and various military intelligence units like the GRU. Under his leadership, the Wagner Group transformed from a traditional PMSC to an active accessory to Russia's neo-imperial endeavors. The group served as the spearheading force during the annexation of Crimea, instructing and fighting alongside the separatists of the self-proclaimed Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk, and defending President Bashar al-Assad's regime in the Syrian Civil War.⁸ Prigozhin was reported to be personally responsible for an assault on the US-backed Kurdish forces in Syria, in which Russian mercenaries and Russian-made weaponries were spotted. He was recently cited recruiting convicted felons at a penal colony in Moldova to sign for the Wagner Group and join the Russian war effort in Ukraine.⁹ The close ties between Prigozhin and the Kremlin inevitably dragged the Wagner Group into the Donbas skirmishes in 2014 and the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Through these battles, the group transitioned from a clandestine military contractor, operating in low-intensity security missions in developing countries in turmoil, to a full-fledged paramilitary corps capable of fighting against regular armies.

Conclusion

The tale of the Wagner Group is just one of the many instances where modern states employ the tactics of secrecy and ambiguity to achieve their political and economic goals without arousing international scrutiny. We now live in a world where international laws and norms have become increasingly codified, cross-border commerce is now closely bounded in an interconnected global business community, and information transparency and digital literacy make it more and more difficult for nation-states to engage in conventional military conflicts without incurring domestic backlashes and international sanctions. As a result, states like Russia have found a renewed interest in private contractors to protect their overseas interests, counterbalance rival influences, and minimize scrutiny, oversight, and criticisms at home and abroad. As organizations like the Wagner Group and its various predecessors continue to challenge international norms and legal codes, more effective oversight and cross-border collaboration are urgently needed to eliminate the gray zone in international laws and to create a more stable security environment across the globe.