‘Continuing War by Other Means’: The Case of Wagner, Russia’s Premier Private Military Company in the Middle East

By Sergey Sukhankin

Summary

The Wagner Group is a Russian private military company that has been active in Ukraine and Syria. In early 2018, reports of the combat deaths of over 200 Wagner personnel in eastern Syria shed an important light on the gray zone of Russian military operations in which such paramilitary forces are deployed. Meanwhile, Wagner’s ongoing expansion across the globe is providing key lessons for understanding the evolution and likely transformation of this type of organization in the future. Given Moscow’s reliance on non-linear means of warfare and the frequent desire to maintain “plausible deniability” in its operations abroad, exploring and analyzing the Wagner Group offers a deeper insight into Russia’s role and modus operandi in conflicts across the world, especially when using Private Military Companies (PMC).

Introduction

The decimation of the Wagner Group PMC near Deir el-Zour (a city in eastern Syria, some 450 kilometers from Damascus) in early February 2018,[1] has highlighted the role Russian mercenaries play in the Kremlin’s foreign policy. But the broader phenomenon of Russian PMCs, including the Wagner Group, is highly complex, as exemplified by the nervous and incoherent official reaction to the deadly Deir el-Zour clash;[2] the re-initiation of a highly contradictory debate on the legalization of PMCs in Russia by all key ministries/institutions/fractions (including the *siloviki*, or security services personnel); as well as the alleged assassination (officially identified as a suicide), in April 2018, of Maxim Borodin, a Russian journalist who had been investigating Wagner. The sense of confusion surrounding the activities and roles played by Wagner in Syria was further increased by the ensuing comments of prominent Russian conservative military officers. For instance, Colonel General (ret.) Leonid Ivashov, currently serving as the president of the Academy for Geopolitical Problems (and well-known for his anti-Western posture), claimed that the official version of the deaths of Wagner fighters at Deir el-Zour was a “purposeful distortion” by the

Russian media and the Ministry for Foreign Affairs.[3] Similarly, authoritative Russian media started to question whether the Wagner Group may have been "set up."[4]

This article aims to analyze the activities of Russian PMCs in the Middle East, with specific emphasis on the Wagner Group. The following will:

- Provide a general framework for explaining the historical context behind the development of PMCs in Russia and the evolution of their functions;
- Analyze the background of the Wagner Group, its main stages of development, the geographical scope of operations and the main tasks/functions performed;
- Examine the nature of the Wagner Group through the lens of its alleged ties with the Kremlin and key Russian ministries;
- Outline the composition, organizational structure as well as the command-and-control (C2) system of the Wagner Group; as well as
- Reflect upon this organization's prospective future activities, both within the region and beyond.

Mercenaries, 'Tourists,' and 'Volunteers': Russian PMCs in a Historical Context

The use of private military forces by the state for achieving specific geopolitical and strategic objectives was an integral part of the pre-1917 Imperial Russian state. Examples include:

- The employment of Carsten Rohde by Ivan the Terrible during the Livonian War (1558–1583) to conduct both military operations and propagate economic contacts in the Baltic Sea region;
- The expedition of Yermak Timofeyevich (1582–1584), organized and handsomely financed by the powerful Stroganov family, which paved the way for the Russian conquest of Siberia; and
- The "volunteer army" assembled by Prince Dmitry Pozharsky and Kuzma Minin, which ultimately managed to expel the forces of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

The employment of mercenary forces also included extensive reliance on non-Russians (for example, the Nogais); and these formations often performed as "private armies."[5] Furthermore, "asymmetric actions" featured the use of partisan movements that could effectively target the over-extended communication lines of an invading adversary. The backbone of such partisan units was formed out of experienced military forces. This idea gained such popularity in 19th-century Russia that, in the aftermath of the Patriotic War of 1812, infamous Russian soldier-poet Denis Davydov implicitly suggested granting partisan forces the status of a separate branch within the Russian Armed Forces.[6]

In effect, Russia's vast landmass, harsh climactic conditions and lack of proper infrastructure historically had a profound impact on Russian military strategists. On several major occasions (such as those mentioned above), these materialist factors generated a reliance on the principle

of asymmetry, including the employment of irregular military formations. In those instances, Imperial Russia's military behavior thus somewhat came to resemble the mercenary raiding tactics used by the Scythians against the Persians around 513 BCE.[7]

In the Soviet period, Moscow's overarching Communist ideology ushered in a new pattern in the state's use of asymmetric activities. Notably, the Cold War was marked by numerous regional conflicts in the so-called "Third World" that the two superpowers became involved in either overtly or covertly. And aside from offering economic support in those instances, the Soviets also regularly sent in "military advisors." The Middle East, in particular, presents one of the best examples for how Soviet military advisors grew into an important instrument of Moscow's foreign policy. In Egypt alone, between 1967 and 1973, the numbers of Russian military personnel rotated into and out of the conflict reached a staggering 30,000–50,000.[8] However, the death of Gamal Nasser (1970), the somewhat more moderate approach taken by the new president, Anwar el-Sadat (1970–1981), as well as dramatic developments in Syria shifted Moscow away from viewing Egypt as a "vanguard" of anti-Western forces in the Middle East.

After the "loss of Egypt," and following the military coup in Damascus led by Hafez al-Assad (the father of current Syrian President Bashar al-Assad), Soviet attention shifted toward Syria. The latter country began receiving substantial economic and military assistance from Moscow directly coordinated by the Soviet Ministry of Defense. However, Soviet soldiers and military instructors were being transported to the Middle East as "tourists"; and their subsequent deaths in the Arab-Israeli wars (a.k.a. the "Wars of Attrition, 1967–1974) as well as the civil war in Lebanon (particularly in the late 1970s) were kept quiet.[9] This mode of operation highlighted Moscow's concern over maintaining a level of deniability in regional conflicts across the Middle East. Illustratively, Marshal of the Soviet Union Andrei Grechko declared, in 1970, "should any of you [Soviet soldiers furtively sent to the region] be shot down near the Suez channel, we do not know you… get out of this mess by yourselves."[10]

Similarly, during the Angolan civil war and its most intense period of fighting (1975–1991), Moscow sent Soviet military advisors (their number likely exceeded 10,000 men) clandestinely to Africa as non-military personnel. These soldiers ended up playing a decisive role in the conflict. This focus on ensuring Moscow's ability to deny the presence of Russian mercenary forces deployed abroad was honed during the Soviet period at the highest levels of government. Additionally, the Soviet Union approved the use of Cuban "military advisors" throughout Africa as heralds of the Socialist cause.

While the institution of "military advisors" formed the security pillar of Soviet methods of non-linear warfare against the West, the Soviet period also witnessed the simultaneous use of so-called "ideological diversions" as one of the main tools of Moscow's information-psychological warfare against the "capitalist world."[11] This combination sharply contrasted with the patterns established during the antecedent period of Russian warfare. In the pre-1917 period, Russia did not wage a permanent ideological struggle against the West—irregular forms of warfare were either used on an *ad hoc* basis (during military conflicts, such as the War of 1812), or for achieving geo-strategic objectives (including the conquest of Siberia). But under Communist rule (especially after 1945), irregular warfare primarily became a tool used by the Soviet side to achieve geopolitical objectives within its broader ideological confrontation with the West.

The dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) witnessed a number of regional conflicts that broke out on the margins of the former USSR. And these clashes notably featured the introduction of Russian mercenaries. So as not to lose its influence over the newly independent republics on its periphery, Moscow was keen to use illegal military formations, in addition to other strategies, to secure Russia's participation in those regional conflicts without becoming directly or overtly involved. This experience, however, was undermined by several important failures, including inside Russia's borders. For instance, prior to the First Battle of Grozny (1994–1995), Russian special services (allegedly the Federal Counterintelligence Service) organized an attack by recruits without any military insignia to force then–Chechen President Dzhokhar Dudayev from power. However, after the humiliating collapse of this campaign, the Russian soldiers who had "volunteered" for the operation were disavowed by the authorities; notably, Defense Minister Pavel Grachev labeled them "mercenaries."[12]

Russia also used irregular forces in other strategically important theaters beyond the former Soviet Union, namely in Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. Russian "volunteers" (up to several hundred people) began arriving to the region in small groups to perform reconnaissance-subversive tasks between 1992 and 1995. Specifically, in the city of Višegrad, in 1993, the first Cossack unit (*sotnia*) numbering 70 persons was deployed. According to various sources, the unit consisted of Russians from Rostov Oblast and the Volga Region of southern Russia; they were later joined by members from St. Petersburg and Siberia. Most likely, these first groups were assembled as volunteers. In time, effort was made to set up a more institutionalized, contractual process that could move beyond an *ad hoc* system of attracting mercenaries. Evidence suggests that at this later stage, the decisive role in terms of formation and organization was played by the St. Petersburg–based security company "Rubikon," which was said to have been coordinated by the Federal Security Service (FSB).[13]

Rubikon was the first attempt to create a Russian PMC for specific geopolitical objectives. At the same time, Rubikon signified the growing interests of the *siloviki* in monetizing the mercenary business. In July 2007, the Russian Duma and the Federation Council (the lower and the upper chambers of the Russian parliament, respectively) voiced their support for a piece of legislation[14] that allowed such "strategically important enterprises" as Joint Stock Company Transneft and Gazprom to "employ arms and *special means for securing production procured by the state* [author's emphasis]."[15] This move by the Russian government granted the security services permission to create businesses and enterprises involved in the extraction and the transportation of hydrocarbons, their status and ownership rights. The Ministry of Internal Affairs stood to profit from the Russian legislation by contributing to the effort.[16]

It is thus worth mentioning that between 1997 and 2013, Russia PMCs (or groups roughly falling within this definition) went through an interesting transformation in both quantity and quality: Their overall number increased dramatically, and some important structural changes ensued. Among the most well-known companies, one could mention the RSB-Group, MAR, Antiterror, Moran Security Group, E.N.O.T. Corp., Tigr Top-Rent Security, and Slavonic Corps Limited.[17] Furthermore, the *siloviki* started to play increasingly important role in terms of composition of these groups.

In this regard, an important point should be made: Russian PMCs started as a force tasked with solving narrow geopolitical objectives but then began taking on broader economic (mainly energy) issues. The ongoing Ukrainian crisis, which witnessed Russia's employment of non-linear warfare means in Crimea and the Donbas region, also triggered further dramatic changes in the domain of Russian PMCs.[18] It is crucial to acknowledge that the Wagner Group and its

predecessor, the Slavonic Corps (the surviving parts of which were turned into and rebranded as Wagner), were a living embodiment of these transformations.

Russian Conceptualization of PMCs: War, Politics and Business

Over time, Russian writers and military theoreticians developed an understanding of PMCs that pointedly differs from the Western perspective. In contrast to Western views, for Russia, PMCs occupy an equal position with regular army units in the battle space and play an increasingly important role in a conflict zone. Moreover, given the fact that the state is the *de facto* main stakeholder and a coordinator of PMC activities, these companies are "not 'private,' " writes Valeriy Boval, adding, they "are some sort of governmental structures, and a tool of the state's foreign policy."[19]

Major General Sergey Kanchukov, the former head of Siberian Military District intelligence and a veteran of the military intelligence service (GRU), implies that a combination of advanced technical equipment and high professional skills, directly controlled by the state, allows Russian PMCs to take on tasks usually performed by regular Russian army forces. Furthermore, he argues that unlike the regular Armed Forces, these structures are free to choose any means to achieve their specific objectives.[20]

Other Russian writers take a broader prospective: they deem PMCs to be a backbone of the so-called "power economy" (*silovya ekonomika*). Professor Alexandr Ageev, a member of the Russian Academy of Natural Sciences, defines the power economy as a state-controlled system of coercion (including a reliance on limited-scale military conflicts, if necessary) aimed at realizing economic goals.[21] This important aspect envisages the convergence of geopolitical and geostrategic/economic objectives that are to be attained by PMCs operating under the umbrella of the government. That arrangement, importantly, allows the state to avoid being implicated in *de facto* illegal activities (plausible deniability).

The outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis and the Syrian civil war give new impetus to the development of Russian PMCs under the principle of "asymmetry"—particularly as "non-linear conflict" reenters Russian military-strategic parlance.[22] Importantly, Russian writers, including Igor Panarin, Alexander Dugin, Sergey Moshkin and others, have been quoting classical Russian/Soviet military strategists such as Alexander Svechin (Soviet military thinker and professor at the Academy of General Staff) and Marshal of the Soviet Union and Chief of the General Staff of the USSR (1977–1984) Nikolai Ogarkov. Both of those men, during separate periods, envisioned non-conventional forms of warfare as a backbone of future conflicts.[23] The fact that current Russian military theorists are quoting Svechin and Ogarkov is highly significant as it points to increasing emphasis on "the necessity to develop their own theories, forms and types of employment of military forces—not to follow Western principles." This is particularly notable given the necessity, according to Russian military analysts and intellectuals, to plan and provide asymmetric forms of response (*asymmetrichny otvet*).[24]

The continuity between the Soviet and Russian periods of PMC development appears to reflect traditional Russian models of using proxies. Perhaps the best example of such continuity was expressed by the Russian chief of the General Staff, Army General Valery Gerasimov, who has emphasized a direct connection between "guerrilla and subversive methods" and "color revolutions." This fact, according to Gerasimov, requires maintaining a balance between a "high-technology component" and the necessity to prepare the Russian Armed Forces for

actions in "non-traditional circumstances" during color revolutions sponsored by the West.[25] This objective is to be achieved through anti-asymmetric forms of warfare, the ability to nullify the high-tech capabilities of the enemy, and the reintegration of Russia's own experience of partisan/guerrilla fighters of the Great Patriotic War (1941–1945).[26] Gerasimov primarily referred to the above-mentioned classic military thinkers and their stress on off-the-beaten-path ways of thinking. He also called for taking a fresh look at works of the Soviet military theorist Georgy Isserson (1898–1976) and reconsider the principle of mobilization and concentration of armed forces *prior* to the outbreak of military conflict.

In this context, Gerasimov is making a clear reference to aligning traditional and non-conventional forms of warfare, relying on Russian historical strengths in employing PMCs. Importantly, the ability to effectively fight partisan/guerrilla warfare has traditionally been seen as one of the most important means to achieve Russian military victory.

In this regard, Russia's PMCs are explicitly a force capable of both economic and geopolitical functions. And as such, Russian PMCs have both a broader range of tasks and employ different tactics in comparison with standard PMCs, particularly in the West. Consequently, Russia's PMCs regularly assume control over "gray zones" in order to create "zones of artificial stability." The purpose of this PMC mission is "exploitation of natural resources and assuming partial political control over an area(s), with the existing political regime still remaining 'in charge' to preserve the legitimacy of the territory."[27] Again, this factor allows the Russian side to bolster plausible deniability and ward off accusations while at the same time remaining a *de facto* party to the conflict. Moreover the government is relieved of the burden of supporting these proxy forces. The case study of the Wagner Group provides the most salient example of a Russian PMC in action utilizing the above-described conceptual notions articulated by Russian military theorists.

Who Is Who in Wagner?

A key question boils down to identification of actors in the Wagner saga. It is essential to look into the personalities and factors that make-up the Wagner Group.

The Leader

The Wagner Group is headed by former GRU Lieutenant General (ret.) Dmitry Utkin. Initially employed by the Moran Security Group, Utkin later took part in the Syrian campaign with the Slavonic Corps. Known for his sympathies toward ultra-conservative ideologies—one Ukrainian report suggested that Russian neo-Nazis joined the Wagner Group first in Ukraine and subsequently in Syria to serve the higher purpose of achieving a "Russian World," or *Russkiy Mir*, beyond Russia's actual borders[28]—Utkin demonstrated loyalty and devotion to the Kremlin's *Russkiy Mir* idea. His valuable experience serving within Russia's elite military forces, combined with relatively deep knowledge of the Syrian environment (despite the poor performance of the Slavonic Corps in Syria), made him one of the most experienced and charismatic PMC leaders in Russia. His success as the commander of the Wagner Group in Ukraine and Syria elevated Utkin to such an extent that he and his colleagues were invited to the Kremlin on December 9, 2016. Utkin's picture, standing alongside Vladimir Putin, was circulated in the Russian media, and he was awarded the Order of Courage (*Orden Muzhestva*).[29]

Training Techniques

Wagner's training center is located in Molkino, Krasnodar Krai. The facility belongs to the GRU's 10th special forces brigade. Notably, the site's recent modernization was funded by the Russian Ministry of Defense, which spent some 41.7 million rubles ($675,000) on these improvements.[30] All this points to the close ties between the group and both the GRU and the defense ministry. Specifically, the Wagner Group has access to the training techniques and resources used by elite Russian military formations, which made it superior to other Russian PMCs as well as their adversaries in Syria.

Arms and Equipment

Various sources have identified Wagner personnel to be armed with advanced small arms and light weapons. In addition, during the period of this PMC's greatest combat successes, news reports have noted the Wagner Group's employment of, *inter alia*, T-72 main battle tanks, BM-21 Grad multiple rocket launchers, as well as D-30 122-millimeter howitzers. Routine training involves constant shooting practice with different types of arms. And, importantly, before deployment to the theater, Wagner personnel go through a preparatory stage that includes comprehensive training for up to two months at the Molkino base[31].

Command and Control

The Wagner Group maintains a clear and well-developed C2 system. Out of the 2,349 personnel reportedly deployed to Syria during 2016–2017, Wagner's command structure was organized into an upper level, consisting of the commander-in-chief and a managing director, as well as a middle level of command. The latter includes the administrative group (388 personnel), the general staff (19 persons), and the control group (36 persons).[32] On top of that, Wagner places special emphasis on coordination of the "military part" of the group, where the key role is ascribed to the Department of Military Preparation. Various subunits within the Department of Military Preparation are responsible for firearm training (*ognevaja podgotovka*), engineer training (*inzhenernaja podgotovka*), tank and infantry fighting vehicle crews (*ekipazi tankov y BMP*), tactical training (*takticheskaja podgotovka*), as well as artillery and anti-aerial defense (*artilleria y PVO*).

Importantly, the Wagner Group's clear division of functions and responsibilities as well as its well-established C2 system follow a template drawn from the structure of the Russian Armed Forces. This structure allows Wagner and other Russian PMCs to carry out offensive missions or operations usually performed by the regular Armed Forces. This aspect has meant that the Wagner Group could conduct operations against forces deemed to be unfriendly to the Russian and Syrian regimes, independent of Syrian forces, and even sometimes instead of Bashar al-Assad's regular military.

Finances

After 2014, Russia experienced a visible economic downturn, with both living standards and real wages rapidly falling. These trends have been particularly painful for Russians living in

the remote parts of the country (*glubinka*). Private interviews and investigative reporting revealed that many middle-aged Russian men (35–50), especially those with a former military background who could not adjust to the reality of civilian life, with dependents and/or families (on many occasions burdened with financial troubles), have sought employment with Russian PMCs.

Wagner's finances are difficult to ascertain, but there is clearly a robust flow of cash into this firm. It needs to be stated that information on the "financial side" of participation in Wagner is rather contradictory (different sources present various details); yet, on the basis of the available data, it is possible to provide some basic figures. Prior to deployment to Ukraine or Syria, members of the group could expect to receive 80,000 rubles ($1,300) per month during preparations at Molkino; 20,000 rubles ($1,900) monthly once in Ukraine; and 180,000 rubles ($2,900) each month for "installing order" on the territory of the "Luhansk People's Republic" (LPR—the occupied, separatist portion of Ukraine's Luhansk region).

In addition to the salary, 60,000 rubles ($960) per week was guaranteed while serving in action. Compensation for death to the family varied from 2,000,000 to 3,000,000 rubles ($32,000–$48,000). In comparison, the "insurgents" from the Donetsk and Luhansk "People's Republics" were making approximately 15,000 rubles ($240) per month.[33] The income differential was a persuasive argument for joining the conflict in eastern Ukraine as a member of a PMC.

The Syrian experience, on the other hand, consisted of two parts. From 2015 to 2016, the salary earned by Wagner employees (on average) may have reached 240,000 rubles per month ($3,800). Whereas, at the height of Russia's Syrian campaign (as of early 2017), Russian sources suggest that the monthly wages may have been as high as 500,000 rubles ($8,000). This figure, however, was contradicted by other sources, which suggested salaries of 250,000–300,000 rubles ($4,000–$4,800) per month.[34] Death in combat reportedly resulted in up to 5,000,000 rubles ($80,000) in compensation for the family,[35] which is notably the standard compensation for the death of a Russian contract soldier.

Logistics

Another essential aspect for the Wagner Group's success has been Russia's commitment to provide it with the logistical resources of the entire Southern Federal District (SFD). At this juncture, it is also imperative to underline strategic role of Rostov-on-Don in terms of the development and functioning of Wagner. The city located in the southern part of the SFD, which effectively makes it one of the key logistical venues in southern Russia. The Rostov Oblast plays a pivotal function in the eastern Ukrainian conflict, serving as the main artery for technical-material support for the Donbas separatist forces. At the same time, the city of Rostov has been allocated the primary role in terms of transferring Russian servicemen (both privates and contract soldiers) to Syria via the Cham Wings air company (which also flies civilian Airbus A320s).[36] Most likely, members of the Wagner Group were transferred to Syria via the same scheme, using the Platov International Airport (also in Rostov Oblast).

Ownership Structure

The perception of Wagner as the private army of Kremlin-connected Russian billionaire Yevgeny Prigozhin (popularly known as "Putin's chef") has indeed gained much popularity,

especially in light of a May 2017 energy-related deal, which granted Prigozhin a sizable 25 percent share of Syria's oil and natural gas extraction business. This assessment is also supported by an argument that Wagner took part in the takeover and subsequent protection of oil and gas fields in Syria. This argument, however, raises the issue of how one tycoon (close to Putin, yet by no means the most influential one) would be allowed to singlehandedly play such an important role in the Syrian conflict.

Here, it is noteworthy to recall the proposed March 27, 2018, bill in the State Duma that was supposed to legalize PMCs in Russia (PMCs are technically illegal in the Russian Federation). Despite the potential profitability of the measure, the initiative suffered a sound defeat after being unanimously rejected by the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Russian National Guard (Rosgvardia), the Federal Security Service (FSB), the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) and the Federal Guard Service of the Russian Federation (FSO).[37] The sense of controversy was amplified by the fact that, on previous occasions, such key figures as Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, former deputy prime minister for defense and space industry Dmitry Rogozin, prominent members of the *siloviki* faction (such as Colonel General Vladimir Shamanov) and even President Vladimir Putin himself had argued in favor of legalizing PMCs.

The above leads to three suppositions that could explain Russia's unwillingness to legally sanction PMCs despite a clear expansion of these types of groups. First, Russian officials might be preoccupied with issues of licensing and potential constitutional amendments, the unpredictability of PMCs' performance, and/or the forfeiture of deniability by the state—these, rather superficial arguments are most commonly floated in the Russian official media. Second, the performance of Wagner in Syria was ultimately so poor that the potential legalization of PMCs would cast a shadow on the military skills of Russian forces engaged abroad. This argument was voiced by Leonid Ivashov who asserted, "[W]e have attained success against poorly armed terrorist formations; yet, against the US, we have no argument other than our strategic nuclear forces, which are not present in Syria."[38] Third, thanks to its legally ambiguous status, Wagner Group is a much-sought-after instrument for performing tasks that regular armed forces could not be implicated in (such as seizing control over gas/oil fields and critical infrastructure).

These calculations do not, however, rule out a fourth option that could represent a combination of the aforementioned arguments. Namely, interested parties can currently use private military companies to accomplish specific economic objectives, while principles of asymmetric warfare can simultaneously be tested in conditions of real-time warfare. Incidentally, this option does naturally reflect the thinking of leading Russian writers and analysis on the role and nature of Russian PMCs.

The Ukrainian Chapter and Its Effects

The Wagner Group can originally be traced back to the so-called Slavonic Corps, registered in Hong Kong by Vadim Gusev and Yevgeniy Sidorov from the Moran Security Group.[39] Elements of this earlier PMC eventually formed the backbone of Wagner. The Wagner Group first conducted combat operations in southeastern Ukraine, in 2014. Russian investigative journalist Ruslan Leviev has reported that the Wagner Group took an active part in Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea.[40] At that time, the Wagner Group consisted of a patchwork of various elements, ranging from the remnants of the Slavonic Corps to local volunteers with

personal motives. However, Russian sources denied the fact that at this stage the group included "volunteers."[41] In any event, while in Ukraine, the group primarily operated on the territory of the self-proclaimed Luhansk People's Republic, with Wagner remaining one of the least known units due to the fact that it was inactive on social media and on no occasions was it mentioned by the local authorities.[42] Its high level of competency in this hot spot signaled that Wagner was being run, organized and equipped by the GRU.[43] Russian and Ukrainian sources note that the Wagner Group performed operations on the territory of the LPR that required a high level of military proficiency. For example, Wagner personnel were responsible for the assassination of LPR's "minister of defense," Alexander Bednov; the killing of Aleksey Mozgovoy, the leader of the Prizrak Brigade; the disarmament of the "Odessa" mechanized brigade; and of wide-scale repressions against Russian Cossacks who had previously served in Luhansk Oblast but, with the collapse of the Moscow-backed "Novorossiya" ("New Russia") project for southeastern Ukraine, grew more "independent" of the Kremlin.[44]

The "Ukrainian chapter" of Wagner's history demonstrated the ability of the group to solve tasks of relatively high complexity in a discreet manner. This aspect allowed it take on increasingly sophisticated tasks and responsibilities as well as an expanded geographic area of operations.

The 'Syrian Chapter': From Triumph to the 'Russian Ilovaysk'

Wagner's performance in Syria is a story of success followed by failure, at least as of mid-2018. During the retaking of Palmyra from the Islamic State (in spring 2016), the main forward advance into the ancient Syrian city was conducted by the Wagner Group. This fact was implicitly acknowledged by the commander of the Russian Armed Forces in Syria, Colonel General Aleksandr Dvornikov, who noted the presence of certain "forces of special operations […] tasked with various special missions."[45] Moreover, it was reported that, near Latakia and Aleppo, members of the Wagner Group (and presumably members of others PMCs, such as ENOT) were coordinated by the GRU and the FSB for various duties. Arguably, at this preliminary stage, when Wagner played an important role in terms of enabling pro-al-Assad forces to re-gain parts of the country, military successes were to a greater extent stipulated by the weakness of the opponent rather than the inherent strength and invincibility of the Russian PMC itself. As rightfully pointed out by Colonel General Ivashov, the main adversaries Wagner faced in Syria at that time were poorly organized and inadequately trained, lacking experience, coordination and proper C2. At the same time, Wagner by no means performed the role of a standard PMC in the Western sense: both the nature of its operations and the mode of actions suggest that the group carried out purely military functions—not supporting tasks Western PMCs are normally tasked with as part of their corporate mission.[46]

The Wagner Group's massacre at Deir ez-Zor, where the group was deploying to seize oil and gas fields in early 2018, illustrated the collapse of deception tactics (*maskirovka*), including the use of Russian mercenaries in conjuction with Syrian forces in conditions of the desert. Approximately, 200 Wagner personnel were killed in a battle with joint US-Kurdish forces.

The 'Russian Ilovaysk': What Went Wrong at Deir ez-Zor?

The decimation of the Wagner Group near Deir ez-Zor—an incident sometimes referred to as the "Russian Ilovaysk, in reference to the huge losses suffered by Ukrainian forces in August

2014, at the hands of regular Russian military units—can be attributed to a combination of factors:[47]

Lower quality of training and equipment. In spite of the Wagner Group's initially excellent training and equipment, the fighting quality of its personnel deployed to Syria subsequently began to drop. Namely, regular shooting practice was abandoned, and both the quality and quantity of arms and munitions stagnated. Furthermore, the lack of any aerial support (one of the key factors behind this PMC's tragic rout in 2018) left Wagner somewhere in between being a regular armed force and a guerrilla/partisan formation, thus profoundly restricting its operational capabilities and decreasing the group's effectiveness.

Lower quality of personnel. Prior to 2017, with a very minor exception (the "*Karpaty*" unit, headed by Russian Lieutenant Colonel Oleg Demianenko), the group consisted of Russian citizens with some level of primary military background. But this policy subsequently underwent changes. Namely, in 2017, the Spring Brigade (*Vesna*), consisting predominantly of ethnic Ukrainians (numbering 100–150) with no proven record of military experience, was formed.[48] Furthermore, the Conflict Intelligence Team (CIT), which investigates Russia's participation in conflicts around the world, has highlighted the lack of elite special forces present among the Wagner Group's casualties in Syria and Ukraine.[49] Other known examples also suggest that the quality of personnel has been gradually decreasing, particularly since 2017.

New payment policy. As of 2017, financing (the nature of which remains blurred by frequently contradictory information) of the Wagner Group has allegedly become the sole responsibility of the Syrian government, which has led to "constant delays in payment and altercations over the promised amount."[50] Only top-notch specialists were given the highest possible monthly wages, equaling 240,000 rubles ($3,300); whereas lower ranks were paid $2,200 per month. These changes have had a profound influence on both the training and equipment available. At the same time, it has resulted in a lower quality of new recruits. Changes in the payment policy still remain unclear and subject to debate and speculation. These changes are frequently attributed to a struggle between Prigozin and Shoigu for influence and redistribution of economic means,[51] although the lack of precise data does provide conclusive answers on the matter.

The above-indicated factors undoubtedly played a primary role in Wagner's dramatic defeat in early 2018. However, the following factors may have also contributed:

Comparatively poor level of preparation. When clashing with militant groups, the Wagner Group could boast superior fighting skills; yet, the US military represented a foe wielding superior weaponry and at least equally if not better trained personnel. Indeed, its lack of aerial support, aged arms and munitions (including older motorized vehicles), and lack of access to air defense made Wagner an easy target for an assault.

Surprise effect. The majority of available accounts point to the fact that the Wagner Group units were not expecting an aerial attack of such scope and decisiveness—though, explanations vary as to why not. The group was marching in an open space without having taken any precautions; and the US-led attack clearly took them by surprise. Consequently, the idea that the Wagner forces were somehow "betrayed" has gained some popularity among certain Russian experts.[52]

Particularities of the "Russian style" of non-linear warfare. Historically, Russia has waged successful partisan or guerrilla warfare against a strong(er) opponent defensively (meaning on Russian territory) and in a friendly natural landscape (forests and mashes). In Syria, neither of these two elements were available.

And yet, despite the Wagner Group's deficiencies and ensuing military defeat in Syria, recent evidence suggests that Russia has not abandoned the idea of using Wagner as a geopolitical tool of confrontation against the West.

Life After Death: Future Prospects

The loss of life suffered by Wagner in Syria notwithstanding, the Russian PMC has continued to expand. For instance, some analysts have pointed to Russia's growing presence in other zones of instability, such as the Central African Republic (CAR) and Sudan, where the Wagner Group is being deployed.[53] Furthermore, the Ukrainian investigative media outlet *Information Resistance* has presented information on the Wagner Group not only altering its name to Liga (while retaining its former leaders), but also adopting some C2 changes to its structure with the introduction of four new categories of specialists. The nature of those collective changes suggests parts of Wagner could eventually be redeployed to the Donbas region.[54]

It also appears that the main base of preparation for Wagner personnel might be moved from Molkino (which has now been compromised) to other regions. The most logical options seem to be Tajikistan, Transnistria, Karabakh and/or Abkhazia—although other locations cannot be ruled out. Wagner (or its analogue) requires facilities to train in if the group wants to remain relevant, especially as its missions seem to be expanding (such as in Africa).

One way or another, utilizing PMCs is almost certain to remain an essential part of the Russian military-strategic agenda. This doctrinal aspect is supported by the following:

First, the issue of deniability and Moscow's "we are not there" behavior and rhetoric profoundly enhances the maneuverability of the Russian side. This aspect is assisted by the murkiness regarding the actual military losses suffered by Russia in local military conflicts, since PMC personnel deaths are generally not included in regular casualty lists. Such obfuscation is an important element of the propaganda disseminated by the Russian state-sponsored media, which aims to present the image of the Russian Armed Forces as invincible and superior to other militaries.

Second, the presence of PMCs on the battlefield offers both flexibility and auxiliary functions. These structures could thus be used at virtually any stage of a New Type (or hybrid/non-linear) conflict, as identified by Gerasimov.[55]

Third, is the growing profitability of war. Oleg Krinitsyn, the president of RSB-Grupp, another Russian PMC, noted in 2013, "[T]he era of local and corporate wars is approaching, and services of PMCs will be sought after to even greater extent." Notably, however, Krinitsyn added that he did not envisage "a bright future for Russian PMCs" in terms of their upcoming legalization.[56] Additional evidence, both direct and implicit, points to the fact that various segments of the Russian ruling elites remain preoccupied with the idea of using these sorts of corporate organizations to accomplish specific power economy objectives. RSB-Grupp, for

instance, is concerned with intelligence gathering, legal and military consulting and training, as well as the protection of sea vessels.

Fourth, the issue will in part be driven by the level of public reaction to Moscow's military campaigns abroad. Wagner body bags do not have the same effect as images of killed regular Russian military personnel coming home. Thus, the death of Russian citizens in Syria, presented by the Russian media either as an invention of US information warfare, or, if partly acknowledged, explained away as "mercenaries" dying for economic gain, may not preoccupy the Russian population, thereby insulating the Kremlin from growing public discontent.

Fifth, the proliferation of PMC fighters on the front lines offers Russia a deep source of "cannon fodder" (*pushechnoye miaso*). Poor living conditions, widespread criminality and various difficulties that prevent Russian soldiers from adjusting to civilian life have created a huge pool of recruits (especially middle-aged men) willing to take part in regional conflicts. Interestingly enough, some informed sources have argued that "the structure [i.e., the Wagner Group] has been eradicated at least five times" due to repeated losses of personnel.[57]

Conclusion

In the final analysis, by cultivating a growing number of PMCs like the Wagner Group, Russia has created both a powerful and convenient weapon of non-linear warfare as well as a tool for the Russian elites to achieve their own geo-economic goals. From a military point of view, Wagner's operations in Donbas and Syria appear to have, in part, been designed to test its ability to "control the territory," a concept strongly emphasized by Gerasimov and the Russian General Staff. Importantly, PMCs offer Moscow deniability and conceal its responsibility for deaths of Russian soldiers in operations abroad. Additionally, Russian PMCs and especially Wagner allow for the potential integration of foreigners (from impoverished parts of the post-Soviet space), which provides the Kremlin with another powerful tool of influence to use overseas. Undoubtedly, the Wagner model is here to stay.

Notes

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