

Mercenaries at the Forefront of Russian International Relations

Their pivotal role in the 2014 annexation of Crimea proved the true capabilities of Kremlin-backed mercenaries, but who are these Russian *guns for hire*, and why are they appearing throughout the African continent and the Middle East?

Soldiers of fortune, otherwise known as mercenaries, were a common tool of the newly independent African countries during the Cold War. States such as Rhodesia – now Zimbabwe – employed a vast number of paid foreign freelancers, soldiers with no country, motivated by nothing, but their pay. Their heyday passed away with the end of the Cold War, but not because the demand for mercenary work declined, but because in 1989 international law forbade the recruitment, training and financing of mercenaries. While some continued despite the ban, the last three decades marked a steady decline in the industry worldwide.

That being said, there is a new and unique exception, the Wagner Group. This unofficial Russian firm redefined the genre of mercenaries and moved away from solving domestic power struggles in third world countries and turned into a proxy force of the Russian Armed Forces, taking care of its “dirty work” for the Kremlin abroad.

It is only natural, that such a shadowy establishment as the Wagner Group has been referred to in a number of different ways, but I find three terms particularly descriptive:

“Little green men” – Ukraine – 2014

During the early stages of the annexation of the Crimean peninsula, reports noted the presence of a large number of non-conventional combatants. Unlike insurgents, these men were described less like an improvised militia, and more like a professionally organised, well equipped and trained military unit. The truth lies somewhere in-between. While the absence of the “Россия” shoulder insignia prevented any official link between these countryless “little green

men”¹ and the Russian armed forces, their accent, armament and training all suggest otherwise. The most plausible explanation is that these unidentified troops were soldiers of the Russian private military company (PMC), the Wagner Group.

Although the use of PMCs is in itself legal, their application is extremely limited by international law. PMCs are allowed to provide armed assistance such as securing and transporting needs through and into conflict zones, but under no circumstances can PMCs participate in an offensive military campaign or operate outside the borders of the country whose government employs them. The violation of these restrictions renders any private military company illegal and the international community considers these actions equal to those of mercenaries under the 2001 United Nations Mercenary Convention.²

In 2014, the Wagner Group’s mercenary work proved invaluable for Moscow. Posing as Crimean separatist self-defence units, Wagner troops were able to militarily prepare the peninsula’s Russian takeover in such a manner that the Kremlin was able to deny all early accusations of meddling with sovereign Ukrainian territory.

“Foreign military advisors” – Central African Republic – 2018 – Present Day

In theatrical fashion, the estimated 1,000 military trainers supplied³ by the Wagner Group to the government of the Central African Republic (CAR) are housed in the Berengo Palace, and much like the estate’s previous resident, the self-proclaimed emperor and megalomaniac dictator Jean-Bédél Bokassa, these troops are least concerned with the well-being of the people of the CAR and more interested in the natural resources of the country.

The official task of these “foreign military advisors” is to train the presidential guards, a special branch of the army that owes its loyalty not to the people but to the head of state, President Faustin Archange Touadera. However, the Russians also took over the task of securing a number of gold

¹ Vitaly Shevchenko: “Little Green Men” or “Russian Invaders”? BBC News, 11 March 2021.

² United Nations Treaty Collection: *International Convention Against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries*. United Nations Treaty Collection, 20 October 2001.

³ Sofiane Orus-Boudjema: *Libya: Why are There More than 20,000 Fighters from Russia, Syria and Chad?* The Africa Report, 20 July 2021.

and diamond mines, many of which happen to be operated by a Kremlin-linked Russian firm,⁴ the Lobaye Investment Company.

Offering security detachments and other means of support for cooperative governments in return for mining rights or conflict diamonds closely mimics the dynamics behind the African civil wars of the late 1990s and early 2000s, as in Sierra Leone and in the Democratic Republic of the Congo British diamond merchants and Dutch mining investors financed civil wars. Most importantly, however, the vacuum left behind by those UN resolutions⁵ that purged the African continent of the evil-doing of these “entrepreneurs” from the First World is now filled by the proxies of state actors from the Second World.⁶

“Guns for hire” – Libya – 2019 – Present Day

While a detailed description of the Second Libyan Civil War between the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) and its opponent the Tobruk-based House of Representatives, led by General Khalifa Haftar and supported by the Russians, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, deserves an article for itself, the motives of the Russian involvement can be briefly noted here.

First of all, the Kremlin’s global influence is in question. Libya was a strong ally of the Soviet Union and even if Gaddafi kept his distance from the newly emerging Russian Federation, both Putin and Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov heavily criticised the U.S. for killing the Libyan statesman. Therefore, the Russian leadership sees an opportunity for reasserting its former influence over this strategically important country by supporting General Haftar who is in alliance with Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, the son of the late dictator and Moscow’s favourite candidate to rule Libya. Furthermore, such a victory in Northern Africa would prove wrong the growing number of Western critics⁷ who suggest that Russia is a former global power only capable of asserting its dominance

⁴ Mustapha Dalam – Halime Afra Aksoy: *Russia’s Wagner Group Reportedly Deployed in Africa*. Anadolu Agency, 05 March 2021.

⁵ General Assembly of the United Nations: *The Role of Diamonds in Fuelling Conflict*. General Assembly of the United Nations, 2007.

⁶ Sergey Sukhankin: *Russia’s Growing Military Presence in the Central African Republic*. The Jamestown Foundation, 20 January 2021.

⁷ Robert E. Berls: *Strengthening Russia’s Influence in International Affairs, Part II: Russia and Its Neighbors: A Sphere of Influence or a Declining Relationship?* NTI, 13 January 2021.

over its “near abroad”, such as Ukraine and the countries of the Eurasian Economic Union.

Second of all, much like in the aforementioned African cases, the Wagner group is used to prepare the groundwork for Russian private firms specialised in the extraction of natural resources. If we pay detailed attention to the reported Russian troop movements a distinct pattern appears,⁸ oil and gas infrastructure happens to be in the way of advancing Wagner mercenaries, most notably along the oil crescent in the Sirte Basin.

Third of all, there is a nuanced motive for Wagner’s involvement in the Second Libyan Civil War, a surprising ally of the GNA: Turkey. Russian–Turkish relations are steadily worsening⁹ and a key reason for this rivalry are clashing claims of spheres of influence in the Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA). As Moscow takes all opportunities to fight an indirect war with Turkey, Wagner troops were reassigned¹⁰ from so-called *train–advise–assist* roles to direct combat roles.

To conclude, the Wagner Group proved to be a versatile tool of the Kremlin, which is capable of utilising this unconventional proxy force in the most machiavellian ways. I have introduced how these mercenaries assisted Russia in its territorial claims, help Putin to reinstate the global influence of the Kremlin and act as “brand ambassadors” for state-linked mining and drilling firms throughout MENA.

However, this is nothing but *realpolitik*, state actors dealing with one another as they did for centuries. But what does the Wagner presence mean for the locals? As one would expect nothing pleasant. Allegations of torture,¹¹ extensive use of violence, extrajudicial killings and even war crimes of booby-trapping civilian compounds and murdering prisoners of war (POW) have been raised in nearly all of the African countries where Wagner mercenaries were deployed according to Dr Sorcha MacLeod, a member of the UN’s Working Group on the use of mercenaries.

⁸ Benoît de la Ruelle: *What Future for Libya?* Fondation Méditerranéenne d’Etudes Stratégiques, 03 May 2021.

⁹ Bálint Pongrácz: *Three Factors Contributing to the Worsening of Russian–Turkish Relations*. Eustrat Policy Observer, 21 May 2021.

¹⁰ Jalel Harchaoui: *The Pendulum: How Russia Sways Its Way to More Influence in Libya*. War on the Rocks, 07 January 2021.

¹¹ Julia Steers: *Russian Mercenaries are Raping and Murdering Civilians They’ve Been Hired to Protect*. Vice World News, 19 May 2021.

“No-one wants an extra mouth to feed” – described a former Wagner troop his reason for executing POWs in Libya to the BBC.¹²

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¹² Ilya Barabanov – Ibrahim Nader: *Wagner: Scale of Russian Mercenary Mission in Libya Exposed*. BBC News, 11 August 2021.