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Ryan Benaso

University of San Francisco, ryanbenaso@gmail.com

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**Invisible Russian Armies:**  
**Wagner Group in Ukraine, Syria, and C.A.R**

by Ryan Benaso

University of San Francisco

May 2021

Master of Arts

in

International Studies

**Invisible Russian Armies: Wagner Group in Ukraine, Syria, and CAR**

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS in INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

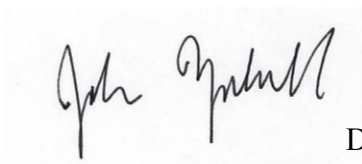
by Ryan Benaso May 29, 2021

UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO

Under the guidance and approval of the committee, and approval by all the members, this thesis project has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

APPROVED:

Capstone Adviser



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## Abstract

This study provides in depth case studies of three distinct theaters of operations that the Wagner Group participated in order to further Russian national interests overseas. The first of these is a case study just across the Russian border in the Ukraine during the Crimean annexation and the subsequent Donbas War where the Wagner Group was founded. The second case study also signifies the next stage in the Wagner Group's evolution as it enlarges and is put in the vanguard for major operations in the Syrian Civil War culminating in the infamous encounter with US forces in Khasham. The third and last signifies the latest in the PMCs evolving roles as it operates more akin to orthodox understandings of PMC roles in the Central African Republic. All of which are analyzed through a logistics, command and control and operational sense that were compared to further reinforce the Wagner Group's role in the new Russian foreign policy doctrine as well as an emerging pattern on how the PMC has been utilized. This latter revelation provides a roadmap that could predict the Wagner Group's actions proportional to Russian interests in a new theater. The study also sheds some light on the flexibility afforded by an illegal PMC that operates in a quasi-controlled state by the Russian government. It touches on how this ambiguous legal relationship can be beneficial to a state that utilizes it when it wants to exert control as well as when it needs to distance itself from unfavorable consequences.

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## **Introduction**

In the past two decades, the state of Russia's foreign policy has been viewed as expansionist. As of April 2021, Russian military forces are massing across the Ukrainian border in what seems like an aggressive stance tantamount to invasion preparations (Tetrault-farber, Emmott, 2021). This is only the latest in a series of coercive foreign policy methods that has seen Russia involved in a number of conflicts in what seems like an attempt at rebuilding the Soviet Empire. These conflicts include the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, the current Donbas War, the ongoing Syrian Civil War and the Central African Republic Civil War. All of which saw a period of instability which the Russian government seized as opportune moments to shore up support for their allies in the region prior to full scale conflict. While Russian boots were seen at all of these conflicts, the latter three were interesting cases that will be examined on this paper due to what seems to be a growing reliance on a Private Military Company (PMC) called the Wagner Group.

Russian military engagement far from home has been sighted in places such as Syria, Libya the Central African Republic and even Venezuela. However, these boots do not necessarily belong to the Russian military. These boots belong to a Russian PMC called the Wagner Group, a private company which is considered an illegal entity under the current Russian Federation's constitution. Understandably, this has puzzled observers that have seen the PMC operate in areas where the Russian government has vested national interests such as Syria, Ukraine and the Central African Republic (CAR). Their successes/ failures in each of these theaters, however, can lend some explanation as to why their activities fall under an ambiguous

legal background. Case studies in the Wagner Group's operations can also shed light into how the PMC fits in Russia's new way of waging war, a "New Type War" or "Hybrid-War" (Bristow, 2020). This new foreign strategy has yielded surprising results for the Russian government at a fraction of the cost, a "Grand Strategy" with PMCs, specifically the Wagner Group, is pivotal. However, in order to continue with this examination of the Wagner Group's activities, a definition of the PMC phenomena requires revisiting.

War has been part of human story since time immemorial. As humanity moves into the age of neoliberalism the rise of the private military contractor phenomenon began to take shape. Since ancient times, violence for hire has been a staple of war. Examples of this can be seen scattered throughout history transcending culture and borders. The Italian Condotieris were used to profound effect by multiple states in several the countless European wars during the renaissance. The English and German had their own versions of martial prowess for hire in the form of the Free Companies and Landsknecht respectively. On the other side of the world, the masterless samurai, Ronin, of the Warring States period are eternally etched in both Japanese legend and infamy. Once proud warriors for their clans, Ronin were Samurai that had no choice but to turn into swords for hire in order to survive in feudal Japan. The tradition of the Papal Swiss Guards, a unit synonymous with even the holiest symbols of the Vatican, were considered the epitome of hired spears during the dominance of Swiss mercenaries in European battlefields. As clearly shown with numerous examples throughout human history, professional warriors were hired by different states for different capacities whether it is on or off the battlefield.

It is clear that hiring for martial prowess is a not a recent phenomenon. The reputation that mercenaries acquired throughout the centuries was garnered through both their victories in combat as well as their sometimes-wavering allegiances. Due to the nature of fighting for profit

rather than for an ideal or national interest that states hired them for, the loyalty of these men has~~ve~~ always been viewed with some suspicion. Though this has been a clear risk to any state looking to hire mercenaries, the private military industry has been experiencing a boom that has been transforming 21<sup>st</sup> century warfare. The privatization of the military is now being done through legitimate business practices where they are more commonly known as private military contractors (PMC) or private security contractors (PSC). The latter is used for companies that strictly engage in defensive purposes while the former encompasses logistics and offensive duties. These professionals have dropped the moniker of mercenary along with the negative connotations associated with it. These modern-day mercenaries pride themselves with professionalism and an efficiency that rivals traditional uniformed personnel. Of course, this is mostly due to many of the contractors themselves are veterans themselves.

This phenomenon of PMC rise requires elaboration in this study since its popularity has seen a surge in proliferation across the western world. The impacts of their contribution to warfare, especially in the post-9/11 stage, has gained immense significance. Post-9/11 reactions by the U.S. and its allies has left their militaries overstretched and worn down by a decade of asymmetrical warfare, this has allowed the private sphere to step in and fill the gap. Their roles range from convoy security duties to logistics support. It's also not unheard of for PMCs to engage in more offensive capacities sometimes changing the course of recent history as was shown with Executive Outcomes effectiveness in Sierra Leone (Isenberg, 2009).

Understandably, this phenomenon can be seen by the utilization of a 25% increase in PMCs by the U.S. in the war against terror (Zenko, 2016). It has been noted that from 2009-2014 there has been "an average of 190,000 contractors to 175,000 uniformed personnel" used in Afghanistan since (Isenberg, 2012, n.p.). That is indicative of 25% of workforce that is involved with COIN



operations (Zenko, 2016). This rise can also be observed on the Russian side in Syria with Russian regular forces to PMCs such as the Wagner group amount to a 1:1 ratio in 2017 (Racz, 2020). However, the West utilizes PMCs in a more defensive manner, in sharp contrast to the Wagner Group, and with a better degree of control. This, however, does not guarantee strict control as evidenced by the humanitarian abuses that were highlighted during the Black Water incidents in Iraq (Isenberg, 2009). The main concern that has been argued against PMC/ PSC is that though warfare has had a modicum of regulation in the form of the Geneva & Hague Conventions, the regulation of privatized side has not been enough. Though considered combatants in warzone, their wartime legal designation is still that of civilians and they are loosely governed by traditional laws of armed conflict. This has had significant backlash on the nations that hire them (particularly the U.S.) as companies like Black Water have been guilty of human rights abuses to the local nationals. Though state militaries have had their fair share of committing atrocities in the fog of war, the difference is that the lax regulations imposed by companies on their contractors compared to stringent discipline enforcement, increases the risk for abuses to be conducted by contractors. This undoubtedly has negative effects for countries that utilize them. Regardless, the PMC boom is apparent in this new age of asymmetric warfare and with it the Wagner Group's rise as well as the enigma of its relationship with the Russian government.

The Wagner Group's<sup>2</sup> activities have ranged from one advising and instructing host nation fights to fielding fully operational units capable of leading major operations that shift the tide of war as was seen in Syria and Ukraine. As already mentioned, this offensive capacity, not unheard of for PMCs, however, Wagner Group differs in that it seems to do so exclusively for Russian national interests and under quasi-Russian state control. At this time, this is difficult to

prove due to the ambiguous nature of the Wagner Group's existence, not to mention the PMC's initial actions and appearance in theaters of conflicts are always denied by the Russian government. However, these links can be further solidified by examining the PMC's patron and what seems like an intimate relationship with Russia's elite, which include no less than Vladimir Putin himself.

An ex-convict that has no prior military experience and ran a sausage stall in St. Petersburg at the same time Vladimir Putin was mayor of the city, Yevgeny Prigozhin enjoyed patronage from Vladimir Putin enabling the expansion of his business and the food industry and the reported foray into the world PMCs due to some unconfirmed insistence by Russian intelligence services (Weber, 2020). Since 2015, Prigozhin has not been seen in public with little proof of life (Rabin, 2019). *Putin's Chef*, as he came to be known, Prigozhin can be linked to individuals and companies that are very much active in areas where the Wagner Group operates (Rabin, 2019). The informal tie to an ex-FSB Lieutenant Colonel turned decade-long President is not the only leadership thread that has been pulled, another former Lieutenant Colonel of note is the PMC's commander named founder and commander, Dmitry Utkin. Dmitry Utkin is a former member of the GRU, Russia's external intelligence agency (Fontanka, 2017). After retirement, he joined the Slavonic Corps, a PMC that's reported as the spiritual predecessor of the Wagner Group that was involved in early on the Syrian Civil War (Fontanka, 2017). Afterwards, reports indicate that Utkin was spotted in the Crimea and the Donbas region fighting alongside former Slavonic Corps members where he gained his *nom-de-guerre*, Wagner, for his reported sympathetic views towards Nazism and Hitler's favorite German composer (Weber, 2020). Utkin and his "Wagner's group" eventually formed the core of the PMC and has since been seen across all of Russia's battlefields. Utkin has since been photographed with Vladimir Putin during an

awards ceremony as well as taking over as the CEO of –“LLC Concord Management and Consulting, [which is] part of the Group of Companies Concord (co-owner of St. Petersburg businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin). The firm is the management company of the Prigozhin restaurant holding. It owns several restaurants in Moscow and St. Petersburg” (Georgy et al., 2017, n.p.). Both of Prigozhin and Utkin are under US sanctions at the moment and have rarely been seen in public. The few signs of life for these two have been in photographs, mostly Utkin, which are never confirmed by their hosts such as the aforementioned official awards ceremony where Putin was present (Fontanka, 2017). When asked about Utkin, the presidential press secretary Dmitry P~~r~~eskov, confirmed that he was on the guest list but did not elaborate on the reason Utkin received an award (Fontanka, 2017).

Another aspect that needs considering in our case studies of the Wagner Group is Russia’s utilization of PMCs in what is now being called as a “New Type War” or “Hybrid War” (Bristow, 2020). The use of various Russian PMCs as a proxy for regular military in hotspots can be partially explained by first defining the Gerasimov doctrine. General Valery Gerasimov was a proponent of irregular warfare and information warfare to achieve strategic goals (Rondeaux, 2019). Irregular warfare is a term used to describe the unconventional use of small military units akin to Special Operations Forces (SOF) for the purpose of sabotaging the main force, engaging in hit-and-run tactics, as well disrupting communications and logistics lines. Essentially, engaging in a limited capacity to attrite the adversary using small groups highly trained professionals with limited resources that appear seemingly out of nowhere. This works hand in hand with information warfare in the digital age, where misinformation and cyber-attacks are utilized to sow chaos and paralyze the main force. Gerasimov gave a speech advocating for the aforementioned “New Type War” or “Hybrid War” that Russia needs to prioritize in order to

maintain its relevance in this new age of great power competition (Bristow, 2020). In this we see the Wagner Group's norming Tactics Techniques and Procedure's (TTPs) as it evolves through the cases that will be examine. TTPs that became the manifestation of the Gerasimov doctrine which showcase the tacit inclusion of the Wagner Group as part of Russia's "New Type War" or Gerasimov's doctrine. Examining the beginnings of the group through its unorthodox assembly will be required for a proper analysis of the Wagner Group's role in the Russian "New Type War" and eventual rise to Russia's pre-eminent PMC. In this pursuit, it is only appropriate that the first case study be where the Wagner Group was founded, Ukraine.

### **Literature Review**

Russian "Grand Strategy" in today's age has seen an evolution in which it utilizes an asymmetric and unconventional spear to expand influence in the form of Private Military Companies (PMCs), the tip of this spear is the Wagner Group. True to this "New Type War", the groups' successes and failures on the battlefield aren't necessarily measured through conventional tactical and operational levels that traditional PMCs prosper in (Bristow, 2020). Indeed, casualty count and territory gained that the Wagner Group has contributed to its state sponsor or parent nation can leave much to be desired. Rather, its irregular utilization by its parent state is measured on the strategic plane in this new age of great power competition. This is referring to the cost-efficient Russian expansion across the Diplomatic, Information, Military, Economic (DIME) spheres that achieve the same geopolitical gains as its near peer competitors at a fraction of the cost.

Russian PMC exploits have taken centerstage in recent years thanks mostly to the Wagner Group being pushed into the limelight. As of late they have been intertwined with Russian expansionism in the modern age. As purported by Candace Rondeaux (2019):

Russian private military contractors (PMCs) are pivotal players in ongoing proxy wars in the Greater Middle East and its periphery. They provide targeting intelligence, training, logistical support, infrastructure protection, and backstop proxy militias and paramilitary groups in key hotspots around the world, including Ukraine, Syria, and Libya. Their covert operations—real and imagined—are also critical in shaping Russia’s strategy for escalation management as well as relations with adversaries and allies (Rondeaux, 2019, n.p.).

Chief among these Russian PMCs is the Wagner Group due to their infamous exploits. The beginnings of which comes from one Yevgeny Prigozhin that has rarely been seen since the Wagner Group took centerstage (Weber, 2020). The PMC he helmed gained its name due to his purported love for that famous German (Weber, 2020) composer. Examining the beginnings of the group through its founding will be required for a proper analysis of the Wagner Group’s evolution and eventual rise to Russia pre-eminent PMC.

As enigmatic as its creator, the Wagner Group’s status as a PMC would be inappropriate if categorized in the traditional sense, where PMC roles focus on logistics and advising. Due to its utilization by Russian government in various theaters of operation in differing degrees, the Wagner Group transcends its western counterparts due to its flexibility and ability operate within Russian legal loopholes as being an illegal entity while still being state sponsored. In Syria, the Russian Federation initially awarded the Wagner Group a contract under the Ministry of Defense and eventual transferred nominal control over to the Syrian government (Racz, 2020). Besides the questionable legality of the group, this further distance it from its initial state sponsor giving the Russian government adequate leeway to disavow at the same time control the PMC as the Wagner Group as it is only allowed to operate the complex Russian loophole under the auspices of national security (Weber, 2020). As such the Wagner Group exclusively operates for the benefit of Russian national interests (Racz, 2020).

The flexibility that the Wagner Group affords the Russian government at a time of international economic volatility and blurred lines of asymmetric warfare has become indispensable. The fact that PMCs are considered illegal in the Russian Federation under Article 359 of the Russian 1996 Criminal Code puzzles the West especially the US as its PMCs in a traditional sense have seen a boom in a post 9/11 world (Racz, 2020). Yet, Putin himself has publicly acknowledged the Wagner Group with accolades. Wagner Group employees are also accorded military funerals with all the pomp and ceremony usually reserved for uniformed services members (Hauer, 2019). Its contracts are awarded exclusively in countries where the Russian government have national interests (Stronski, 2020). Yet the ability of the Russian government to disavow when unfavorable outcomes are obvious, can be seen at examples such as the Battle of Khasham and Mozambique (Stronski, 2020). But for all the inconvenience some of the Wagner Group misadventures produce, Russian movements are unimpeded by the international community and in general has a favorable outcome for future Russian designs in a region (Saleh, 2019). Furthermore, the norming of Russian affiliation with the Wagner Group has desensitized the international community to the point of paralysis.

This paralysis has been seen repeatedly but most notably after the Wagner Groups' disastrous foray at the Battle of Khasham in Syria (Hauer, 2019). Operational and tactically, the misadventure was a blunder that resulted in 200-300 casualties for the Wagner Group and Assad regime forces (Hauer, 2019). During the 4-hour battle, Russian high command adamantly communicated to the US deconfliction cell responsible for the area that the PMC was acting on its own (Hauer, 2019). What can be gleaned from this encounter is the disregard for the Wagner Group when it suits the Russian government (Rabin, 2020). A year before, it was at tip of the sphere for the Russian backed Assad Regime in retaking the territory that the brigade size

element originated from to encroach in proximity to US forces resulting in the Battle of Khasham (Hauer, 2019). In the aftermath of the Khasham, while humiliated, the Russian government has muddled the waters enough that it is still unknown to what extent Russian command and control factored into the execution (Weber, 2020). Afterwards, the Wagner Group was reutilized and exported to other regions of interest to Russian national security, specifically the Central African Republic where Russia has gained a firm foothold in the continent (Weber, 2020). Strategically, Russian influence in Syria remained undiminished and the Assad regime's gains in 2015 are beyond reproach (Racz, 2020). Despite outcry from the international community due to Russian use of PMCs in such a manner, nothing can be done to undeniably link Russian government to the Wagner Groups actions (Rabin, 2019). Due to the blurred lines and the effective misinformation campaign, Russian influence in the region and the Assad regime's 2015 gains were undeniable (Saleh, 2020). This has been accomplished for a fraction of the cost and with negligible casualties to regular Russian forces largely stationed in Laketeia (Weber, 2020).

In the conventional sense, this apparent expendable status for Wagner Group employees should make for a difficult recruitment atmosphere. However, the opposite can be observed, and the PMC has never been found wanting in that department. This is attributed to its higher wages as compared to regular Russian forces. The monthly wage of a Russian soldier in 2017 is \$660 while the average monthly wage of Wagner Group employees is at a comfortable \$4,000 (Bristow, 2019). However, this financial advantage is only subsidized thoroughly while deployed while support in more hospitable areas is "four times less" (Bristow, 2019, pg. 9). To great effect, the PMC ensures that its employees are gainfully utilized in multiple countries around the world where regular Russian forces are seldom seen (Bristow, 2019). The lucrative financial

benefits draw from highly trained ex-Russian military special forces such as the SPETZNAZ and regular forces (Bristow, 2019). Likewise, the PMC also enjoys the same advantages in equipment that the Russian government subsidizes it for (Kofman, 2019). The Wagner Group has been known to equip full size brigades of 500 men with modern Infantry Fighting Vehicles (IFV), modern Russian tanks, Man-portable surface to air missile launchers (MANPADS), and rifles of varying calibers (Kofman, 2019). In contrast, traditional PMCs that the West have fielded to support Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) do not enjoy the same materiel advantage and regular unit compositions to be accorded an offensive role (Isenberg, 2012). These advantages have made the group the pre-eminent Russian PMC among others and has given it the latitude to conduct a wide array of offensive operations and an indispensable dagger to be wielded by the Russian Federation and its allies.

The benefits that the Wagner Group enjoy are a by-product of a revitalized military and evolved doctrine that favors asymmetrical tactics the rose from the aftermath of the fall of the Soviet Union and the new Russian “Grand Strategy” that emerged from this (Monaghan, 2013). In order to grasp the benefits of the Wagner group to Russia’s foreign policy, it is necessary explore the evolution of the Soviet military to the current Russian Federations current makeup and the power structures that enabled this shift in conventional thinking. The current asymmetric nature of Russia’s influence and territorial expansion shifted after its modernization in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Understanding the era preceding this resurgent Russia is required if a full analysis of the Wagner Groups rise and successes would be complete (Keenan, 1986).

At the height of the Soviet Union, the military employed in one form or another roughly a quarter of the 280+ million Soviet population (Odom, 1998). This extends to manufacturing arms, logistical support, dual use scientific research as well as manning the borders. The military



expanded hand in hand with the economy as the Soviet arsenal rose in competition with the US. Manpower for the Soviet military maintained at 11 - 13 million for some time after WWII (Odom, 1998). Likewise, materiel in the form of up 55,000 tanks, 10,101 aircraft, 1,053 ships and 49,000 nuclear warheads also expanded (Odom, 1998). This allowed for a comfortable numerical lead with technological parity against other nations and is comparable to the combined might of Western forces to include their chief rival, the U.S., at the apex of the Cold War.

Contrary to the Cold War narrative that emerged, purportedly stating that the Soviet military favored quantity over quality tactics to overcome their Nazi foes, the Soviets were an innovative force led by competent leaders that had to adapt to survive during the German blitzkrieg. Their numerical superiority was at most overstated. Concentration of forces at a given battlespace meant that majority of units that participated in battle were in numerical parity with their Nazi foes. Indeed, at their most famous victory, the Red Army was credited with turning the tide for the allies at Stalingrad with the Nazis enjoying a 1.6 to 1 numerical advantage in terms of actual manpower engaged (Pennington, 2016). Likewise, 'General Winter' was also attributed as the architect of most Soviet victories to diminish the Red Army's contribution to the allied cause perpetuated during the Cold War. What was seldom examined was the fact that the Red Army's lack of winter equipment for its own troops also had disastrous consequences once the initiative was back in Soviet hands (Grizold et al., 2016). This meant that the seldom attributed factor of strategic and tactical innovation was a steadfast factor to explain Soviet victories in the East (Pennington, 2016). Couple this with Nazi blunders such as the 6<sup>th</sup> Army's refusal to retreat in the face of Soviet encirclement in Stalingrad and the belief in German tank superiority during the Battle of Kursk, then it is undeniable that the Red Army was a very much competent force that was the chief factor in winning Europe for the allies (DiNardo, 1996). Regardless, what can be

regarded as the chief innovation for Soviet tactics were of the asymmetrical sort that date back to even before the Napoleonic Wars.

The Cossacks are an ad\_hoc militia group that were quasi state sponsored and have been for centuries. They were utilized effectively against Napoleon's Grand Armée in 1812 and were instrumental in ending that era. The Cossacks were adept at harassing the edges of enemy lines with hit-and-run tactics as well as picking off any strays that dared wander off from the main forces. They were cheap to arm, recruit formed by local militias and operated quasi-independently from regular forces. Fast forward to WWII and these Cossacks harassed enemies deep within Nazi occupied territory and were instrumental in forming the large partisan groups that operated independently from the Red Army. They were so effective that entire sectors of occupied territory were deemed too dangerous for German forces to operate in unless in larger compositions (Bristow, 2019). This tied down forces that would otherwise have been used and were in dire need at the frontlines. They operated with impunity and specialized in asymmetric warfare, disrupting lines of communication, engaged in sabotaging supply lines, and harassed local garrisons. This all-volunteer force was considered the first Russian PMCs and still endure today (Bristow, 2019).

As mentioned above, post-WWII Soviet Union enjoyed one of the most powerful military forces in human history. However, their experience in modern warfare started to evolve as conventional warfare started to take a backseat. Proxy wars became the norm for the Cold War to avert a superpower confrontation. In Vietnam and Korea, the Soviets sent advisors and pilots disguised as their allies to turn the tide and fight the West to a stalemate. The Soviets next blundered into Afghanistan with a taste of their own medicine. Their experience in modern warfare continued during the decade long Afghanistan misadventure that was factored in for the

collapse of the Soviet Union. Their opponent this time were adept in asymmetric warfare and did not have to means to field large units to face conventional forces in open battle. Utilizing conventional means, the Soviets were punished by the Mujahadeen who were averse to open battles by necessity. The Mujahadeen were able to use the terrain to their advantage and the Soviets suffered for it costing the Soviet military prestige and \$10.4 billion yearly for a decade (Keith et al., 2019).

In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian military pride and competency found itself in a steep decline due to its heavy interdependency with the Soviet economy and vice versa. As territories were lost, the population shrank. The population dropped to 162 million as the USSR lost vast territory with their corresponding population (Keith et al., 2019). Less people to tax meant military expenditure dropped as well as less people employed to maintain and manufacture. The economy suffered resulting in unpaid wages for the soldiers leading to an exodus from the military profession. Ships rusted in ports, aircraft were not maintained, entire military bases were abandoned with all their equipment intact left to rot. Russian military struggle to keep up with modern militaries. Russian oligarchs took control of the economy in the power vacuum that followed and contributed to the decentralization of the economy and rise of inequality in the vast country.

In 2007, Russia experienced a resurgence. Putin's Russia started adapting its economy to recover from Gorbachev's post-Soviet Union gamble. What made this possible was Putin's push for a centralized economy (Monaghan ,2013). This was made possible by Putin's push to centralize corporate statism. According to Lennon and Kozlowski (2008):

The enforced symbiosis between Putin's siloviki and the new oligarchs was almost literally oiled by the felicitously increasing inflow of liquidity and foreign investment, largely thanks to growing European demand for Russian energy exports. As a result,

Russia's overall trade balance at the end of 2007 was a hefty \$128 billion, and its international reserves equaled \$466 billion (Kozlowski, 2008).

The times proceeding Putin's rise led to a massive restructuring and modernization program of the Russian military. With this rise in economic fortune, Putin's foreign policy shortly became one of expansion by military arms as seen in the Russian annexation of South Ossetia with its war with Georgia in 2008.

The sudden foray into an expansionist policy can be partially explained by what Andrew Monaghan purports as a Putin developed Russian "Grand Strategy". According to Monaghan, Putin's rise coincided with a need for a re-structuring of Russian strategic vision, emphasizing the need to develop a long term and short-term approach. In his first presidential term, Putin put forth an 8-page document called "The Strategy of Development of The Russian Federation to 2010" also called "Strategy 2010". In this document Putin outlines:

..Noting that Russia faced the very real threat of being sidelined in international affairs, the strategy document stated its main aims as ensuring the improvement of the quality of life in Russia, the maintenance of Russian independence and cultural values, and the affirmation of Russia's economic and political role in international affairs (Monaghan, 2014, pg 1221).

In 2013 this was further followed up by the military side of the house in the form of Minister of Defence, Shoigu, and Chief of the General Staff, Gerasimov put forth a new Defense Strategy that emphasized irregular warfare and misinformation to achieve this new "Grand Strategy" (Monaghan 2014). The need to stay relevant in international affairs required a strong military and during the Putin years, the Russian military underwent an overhaul which saw its professionalism and confidence restored. In this we see the eventual addition of the Wagner Group as a complement to the Defense Strategy in effect a part of the Russian "Grand Strategy".

As mentioned before, asymmetric warfare has become the bread and butter of PMC's such as the Wagner Group but an alternate view on this phenomenon is also helpful in gaining

better fidelity on this rise. The trend in PMC proliferation can also be explained by Naomi Klein's *Shock Doctrine* putting into context the role the capitalism has played in setting the conditions for privatized military actors (Klein, 2007). Klein's attempt at understanding the PMC rise through "hyper capitalism" explains the devaluation of the art of war and conversion into the business of war. The degradation of the state actors' control of war by privatizing it for profits sake gave capitalism a new market and thus the inevitable rise of PMCs in the modern age. However, this understanding of profits left little room for a hybrid form of PMC category, one that which allowed the Wagner Group to rise under the auspices that it is acting for its own profit margins. Coupling this revelation with the group's continued patronage from a nation that does considers their activities illegal would provide a new lens at which to approach the Wagner Group's rise.

Finally, David Isenberg's critique on the U.S. utilization of PMCs examining how Western PMCs operate will assist in this endeavor. Putting this in contrast with the Wagner Group could also provide a different point of view at which to explain the group's rise and understanding on how to define successes in contrast to western PMCs. In his *Private Military Contractors and U.S. Grand Strategy*, Isenberg adequately examines U.S. dependency on PMCs which would have contrasts on how the Russians use the PMCs that they govern and the quasi-independence that those PMCs, the Wagner Group in particular, enjoys. (Isenberg, 2009).

Both authors go hand in hand in the current understanding of capitalisms' role in the rise of PMCs such as the privatization of war and the subsequent distancing of the Laws of Armed Conflict due to less state control. Through Klein's eyes, it's seen that the over saturated markets that the prosperity of capitalism has given the world eventually felt the need to search for new markets. Thus, the surge of PMCs became inevitable in this capitalist driven society that has

dominated since WWII. This accounts for the current US dependence on the military industrial complex. Through this monetization and the need for further expansion, as is inherent in capitalism, PMCs gain prominence and are in effect less governed due to their privatized nature. This then allows for the weakening of state regulation and a breakdown of discipline as well as severing of ties to the established laws of war that all nations abide by less they be subject to negative ramifications on the world stage. Since the regulation for private combatants is nebulous, this becomes the impetus for Isenberg's negative leanings against the proliferation of PMCs in the western world. Greed and crimes against humanity become more prevalent as Isenberg depicts.

This study on the Wagner Group, however, goes against these narratives as archival evidence suggests that the Wagner Group is more closely aligned with its patron state regardless of its status as a PMC. At the same time, the PMC is able to pursue goals suited to its own monetary interests as exhibited in the Wagner Group's current deployment to the Central African Republic. This study hopes to implore the need to re-examine current understanding of privatized war. Current definitions of PMCs require a revisit as the Wagner Group goes against the current academic understanding and as such has made it difficult to predict the capabilities and the results of the Wagner Group upon its entrance to the world stage. This difficulty was exploited by the Russian state to maximum effect and has since successfully shifted the PMC/PSC paradigm making it an essential tool in the current Russian "Grand Strategy". This examination hopes to contribute to the study of the PMC phenomena by predicting the pattern of this new category of privatized warfare. In the process this study depicts how the Wagner Group's nebulous category creates a new strategic option for states such as Russia<sup>s</sup>.

## **Methodology**

The rise of Wagner Group is inextricably linked to the current Russian foreign policy. However, this link is not clear cut due to the ambiguous legal nature of the group as well as Russia's continued insistence that they exercise no influence over this private company despite evidence to the contrary. This study seeks to further make this link transparent through case studies. The primary method for this paper would be archival utilizing official sources, scholarly works as well as social media all of which have been acquired online.

For the majority of this study, an analysis of pivotal moments in Wagner Group history will give some insight into how the PMC is utilized on a tactical level and how the group fits in the larger Russian foreign policy. To conduct the study, select cases from the Wagner Group's campaigns and contracts have been examined. The first of which would be the group's first appearance as part of "the little green men" that bloodlessly annexed the Crimea for Russia preceding to the Donbas War which started in 2014. The second would be the offensives conducted to wrest Palmyra from ISIS control in Syria for staunch Russian ally Bashar Al Assad as well as the infamous Battle of Khasham in February 2018. The third and final case would be a look into the groups' activities in the Central African Republic, with the first advisors stated to be in country by March 2018. Each case illustrates a different stage in Wagner Group's short history and subsequent evolution.

In each case study, I will compare three different characteristics that I believe further link the PMC to the Russian federation. In the process, this reveals a pattern on how the Wagner Group is utilized and provide some explanation as to how the PMC fits into Russia's new strategic doctrine. Due to discreet nature of the PMC, it is necessary to utilize Russian journalist sources and social media since official reports on the Wagner Group's movements can be scarce as well as lacking detail. In this, google translate was used extensively as well as Russian

speaking colleagues for further verification. First among these would be the logistics of how the Wagner Group gets to each theater of operations as well as the equipment that they utilize. The significance of Wagner Group's contributions in each theater could be dictated by the equipment they utilize and from where the equipment comes from. In addition, linking the uniqueness of Russian equipment that are utilized for certain actions in the post analysis of a battle or left-over weapons fragments can lead to dissecting the tactics of the group that utilized it. Tactics that can then be linked to known Russian Tactics Techniques and Procedures (TTPs) which can be specialized and further fortify its role as the patron of the Wagner Group. Furthermore, how the PMC enters the country can be deduced through the critical nodes that still operate in a conflict-stricken nation. This can be done by examining reports of the members' movements in the country previous in the early stages of infiltration. The quantity and quality of equipment employed also leads us to the second parameter that will be examined in these case studies which would be their command and control (C2). The larger scale the conflict would naturally mean a larger presence for Wagner Group. This would then equate to a larger bureaucratic mechanism in order to function in a proportionally complex operational environment. This information would largely come from former Wagner members as well as other PMC members that worked closely with the Wagner Group. Regardless, as mentioned before, Russian online sources will be utilized. The final parameter would be examining key actions or battles that the Wagner Group may or may not have participated in. The resulting success or failure of operations that the PMC participated would further fortify the analysis of the logistics and command and control structure that would have been the basis for the consequences. More importantly, an overt Russian official response or lack of to any consequence resulting from the Wagner Groups' actions would give us a glimpse as to how the PMC fits into the Russian foreign policy puzzle. The information for this



has been gathered from a plentitude of official sources online since high profile operations would have adequate analysis due to the Wagner Groups' infamous reputation.

By analyzing Russian conventional resources across the Diplomatic Information Military Economic (DIME) spheres that are being exerted in each theater, the resulting observations could provide a cost/benefit analysis that would lend a gauge as to how clear the links can be discerned between the group and Russia. This can be done through analysis of relations within the region and if territorial or resource aims have been achieved that could potentially increase Russian interest and security in a region. The public response by Russia via its official DIME channels would provide an interesting overlay to Wagner Group activities happening simultaneously, the analysis of which could further enhance our understanding of PMC roles in Russian policy. Additionally, investigating where the Wagner Group falters when Russian official footprint in country would better define the PMCs ambiguous lines of communication with the Russian government. Through these methods, the study reveals that the Wagner Group's activities have been paramount to Russian expansionist aims to effectively increase Russian prestige and influence beyond its borders at minimal cost to manpower and treasury.

Examining the beginnings of the group through its unorthodox assembly will be required for a proper analysis of the Wagner Group's role in the Russian "New Type War" and eventual rise to Russia's pre-eminent PMC. In this pursuit, it is only appropriate that the first case study be where the Wagner Group was founded, Ukraine.

### **Case 1: Wagner Group in Ukraine**

The Wagner Group's first foray into the limelight was their appearance in the Donbas region of the Ukraine. However, there's evidence to suggest that members were coalescing around the Wagner banner in the Crimea at the start of the Ukrainian crisis. Initial reports

suggested that members of the group were operating as part of the “polite people” or “little green men” that first appeared in the Crimean annexation (Racz, 2020). It is these men that enabled the Russian annexation of Crimea a bloodless success that disarmed whole sectors of the Ukrainian military in the peninsula. Shortly after the initial reports of the crisis, multiple PMCs appeared and aided in destabilizing the Donbas region for Russian gain. It is these members and the emergence of what would seemingly be *modus operandi* for the future Wagner Group in the Crimea which places the group’s beginnings in the Crimea. This, as well as the wider prerequisite of non-attribution as part of modern Russian military doctrine, it is safe to assume that PMCs were utilized as augments for Russian SOF (Special Operations Forces) as plausible deniability is required for the modern political climate, specifically for groups such as the Wagner Group. This link lies at the heart of Wagner Group’s emergence in the Ukraine.

In the prelude to the Donbas War, Ukraine was at a crossroads regarding the prospects of its EU membership as Russian natural gas transits through its borders into the EU and heavily dependent on income from facilitating this transit. This dependency allows Russia to enjoy significant influence on Ukrainian economic fortunes for Ukraine and the rest of the EU. Indeed, this was one of the factors for the Euromaidan revolution which led to the current conundrum that Ukraine is in. If the Ukrainian desire for EU membership came to fruition, it will have considerable impact on Russian natural gas exports. In addition, Crimea’s largest city is co-located with the Sevastopol Naval Base, a naval base that has been on lease to the Russian Navy since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. It is also one of the few warm deep-water ports available to Russia which facilitates trade in the Black Sea. Due to this, Sevastopol and in effect, the Crimea is strategically vital to Russian trade in the Black Sea. The questionable status of the Wagner Group’s insignia-less members in the region helped sow chaos which eventually resulted

in the annexation of the Crimea that secured Sevastopol for Russia. The subsequent Donbas War which the PMC was founded in and effectively waged asymmetric warfare in the initial stages, rages on to this day. No doubt this has continued to cause instability which continues to prevent Ukrainian initiatives for EU membership.

According to Russian investigative journalist Denis Korotkov, “Members of the Wagner Group were present in Crimea during the annexation” (Sukhankin, 2019, n.p.). Mr. Korotkov’s investigations are mostly focused on the founder of the group, Yevgeny Prigozhin, and has been critical of Moscow’s approach to governance since Putin has taken power. This stance has made him one of the few Russian voices that the West is willing to listen to. Furthermore, at the time of this writing, Mr. Korotkov is being accused by the Russian Federation for “Charges of extremism, links with terrorists, inciting hate, high treason, calling for the overthrow of the constitutional order, rehabilitation of Nazism” (Justice, 2020, n.p.). Undoubtedly, this effort to silence Putin critics can be met with suspicion by free journalists across the globe. At the same time, the Ukrainian intelligence service, the SSU, also reached the same conclusion which asserted that the “little green men” or “polite people” were in fact the members of the Wagner Group (Unian, 2017). While the SSU does not have the prestige and resources as its more famous counterparts in the West, it is regarded that its collection capabilities are adequate however inadequate its resources are to act on them. Of course, confirmation and proper validation of these sources can be somewhat troubling amid Russian denial as well as the ongoing Ukrainian conflict. However, what can be gleaned here is the peculiarity of the sequence of events for the crisis and the Wagner Group’s inception; the annexation of Crimea occurred in February 2014 while the official formation of the Wagner Group occurred sometime in May of 2014 when they finally appeared in the Donbas regions’ Luhansk Oblast (Rondeaux, 2019). This puts members

of the group in country well before the official recognition of the PMC's IOC (Initial Operating Capacity).

While the exact date of the group's formation in the Ukraine can be murky, what is known is that the Wagner Group's members were not the only PMCs present in the Crimean annexation. There were other pro-Russian irregulars and PMCs causing havoc in the Crimea such as Luna, Step, Night Wolves biker gangs, Yemetskin and numerous others which had members that eventually were confirmed to be part of the Wagner Group later on in the conflict (Stronski, 2020). Essentially, what eventually became the Wagner Group was an amalgamation of several experienced members that eventually formed the core. An example of this is some future members of the Wagner Group that appeared in the Crimea were from two other PMCs considered cores of groups such as Luna and Step who themselves "consisted of former members of the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation... [more appropriately called GRU, otherwise known as Russian SOF]; they were assembled in the Krasnodar Krai city of Togliatti" (Sukhankin, 2019, n.p.). This group had members with extensive military records that ranged from Chechnya to Iraq and the former Yugoslavia as well as the conflict in Syria. It is also important to note that this highly experienced group was not solely responsible for the Crimean annexation. The inextricable link between GRU and these seemingly private entities further lends credence to what's now becoming popular fact that PMCs are part of the new Russian strategy. Its role in that episode was mainly in a support capacity for purportedly regular Russian SOF who stormed parliamentary buildings in the Crimea while the irregulars and PMCs seized major lines of communications in support.

This supporting role was in the form of the now infamous "little green men" that wore no insignias indicating national identity as well as masks that mitigate personnel identification. As is

well known, these men popped up seemingly overnight to block vital transportation/communication nodes as well as disarming regular Ukrainian military members cut off in the Crimea. For the most part, these men had no weapons and did not engage in any hostile acts earning themselves the moniker of “polite people”. There is no doubt that this was an effective use of Russian propaganda that was disseminated throughout the peninsula during the crisis. As mentioned before, a prevailing environment that this endured in was one of which the Ukrainian governments’ own communications and transportations were neutralized early on. This enabled effective propaganda dissemination and furthered the confusion that brought about this seemingly overnight Russian expansion in the guise of a “popular” people’s unification movement. This early episode in the Ukrainian crisis unveiled a new Russian TTP (Tactics, Techniques and Procedures) in its modern strategy, the utilization of misinformation, propaganda, subterfuge, and the absence of kinetic confrontations. This TTP would become a staple for how the Wagner Group would be utilized as an opening salvo in exploiting seemingly stable nations to succumb to Russian expansionism.

After the opening salvo of irregulars paralyzing the Crimea, the Wagner Group emerged as an official PMC in Ukraine’s Donbas region in Luhansk Oblast. According the SSU, this was intended to further destabilize the region as momentum was ongoing while consolidating Russian gains in the Crimea (Sukhankin, 2019). The SSU also purported that the Wagner Group was tasked with devolving the conflict to one of kinetics and open hostilities, a sharp contrast to the way things were handled in the Crimea. Additionally, sending PMCs to further destabilize other regions of the Ukraine was already proven successful when Igor Girkin, a key figure in the annexation of Crimea, had already destabilized the neighboring Donetsk sector with a different group of irregulars.

The Wagner Group initially operated “between 86 to 250” men but would eventually reach a number upwards of 5,000 members in the Luhansk Oblast (Sukhankin, 2019, n.p.). Naturally, with a formation of this size the bureaucratic headaches for a new PMC in the midst of a conflict would be insurmountable. Logistics, manning, recruitment, and training would all be significant issues as a private company engaging in the business of war already engulfed in one would be stood up from the ground up, regardless of its members being highly experienced veterans. However, its transition into a fully competent command structure seemed to be seamless and organized as if the Wagner Group was efficiently running well before its official formation. An answer to this puzzle could be found in Igor Girkin’s writings in which he states:

...the Wagner Group is a “private military structure” that “is not directly subordinated to any ‘constitutional’ [i.e., Russian state] security ministry.” Yet, he also argues that “such a decision [to organize the group] must have been taken ‘at the very top’ of the Russian power structure [...] otherwise, none of the ‘official *siloviki*’ would have ever agreed on the creation of a ‘competitor’ that is *de facto* much more professional, aside, perhaps, from the GU and FSB *Spetsnaz*. (Sukhankin, 2019, n.p.).

This link between the Russian state and the Wagner Group is the likely answer as to how a newly formed PMC, regardless of how much prelude its members had in the profession, is able to function seamlessly within a fast-evolving conflict. Additionally, the sudden appearance of the same members from the Crimean to the Donbas region is no easy feat in the middle of a paralyzed Ukrainian transportation infrastructure. This miracle of logistics would not have been possible had it been facilitated by other players in the region, suggesting that the link between state and PMC not only extended from C2 (Command and Control) but also in logistics which would be vital for the next stage of conflict.

As mentioned, between 2014 and 2015 the group started operating in kinetic engagements against Ukrainian military forces, exhibiting an expanded TTP toolbox not seen up to this point in the conflict. A major engagement that the group was a part of was the Battle of

Debaltseve which ran from January 14 to February 20, 2015. The battle was decisive in favor of pro-Russian forces and served to consolidate separatist lines which led to the Treaty of Minsk. During the battle, the Wagner Group participated in frontal assaults much like regular formations with modern tactics in urban warfare and guerilla warfare. This was easily achieved due to the experience of the PMCs members. According to Igor Girkin, the battle served to “transform the [Wagner Group] from a regular PMC towards a genuine shock troop formation” (Sukhankin, 2019, n.p.). This implies that the PMC was able to lead assaults in the vanguard against conventional forces, a significant development from their days of subterfuge just months prior. This newfound capability was facilitated by the influx of not only recruits but also modern equipment that was undoubtedly received from its Russian handlers (Grove, 2014). In fact, it is highly likely that a shoot down of a Ukrainian Air Force IL-76, used for transporting large quantities of supplies and troops, was shot down by members of the Wagner Group.

The downing of an IL-76 occurred on its final approach to Luhansk Airport on 14 June 2014. This was during the battle for Luhansk Airport which lasted from 8 April – 1 September 2014 where Wagner Group was a major participant and at the vanguard of the assault surrounding the airport. Canisters for missiles associated with the Russian made 9K38 Igla MANPAD (Man-Portable) or SA-18 IR (infrared) homing air defense system was found at the scene. The fact that it is Russian made is not enough to attribute the weapon being directly supplied by Moscow, as expected, the leaders of the separatists claiming responsibility for the shoot-down denied this. According to a Luhansk Peoples’ Republic (LPR) officer with the *nom de guerre* Anton; “the Igla in the IL-76 attack was not Russian but a weapon seized from Ukrainians. He declined to say whether the separatists received other weapons from Russia” (Grove, 2014, pg 5). It can also easily be attributed to seized weaponry in the wake of the

Ukrainian military's rapid collapse in the Donbas. However, according to Russian analyst Anton Lavrov "...a Kamaz Mustang military transport vehicle that is not used in Ukraine and cannot be bought there. Reuters could not independently verify that. There was a serious escalation in the middle of June, when heavy weapons began to appear among the separatists, including tanks and artillery in such quantities that it would be hard to attribute it to seizures from Ukrainian stockpiles." (Grove, 2014, pg 6). Additionally, it was reported that the shooters were highly maneuverable in ad-hoc off-road vehicles which exhibited Russian army shoot-and-scoot air defense doctrine. According to Evstafii Botvinyev, who fought alongside the Wagner Group Commander Dimitry Utkin, "Wagner Group operated in small units practicing shock-troop techniques, specifically utilizing jeeps (or off-road vehicles) equipped with machine guns. This tactic allowed Wagner units to successfully use "hit-and-run" tactics." (Stronski 2020, n.p.). With a combination of highly likely Russian-sourced weaponry, proficiency, and co-location of the PMC around the Luhansk Airport, it is highly likely that the Wagner Group was responsible for the engagement (Unian, 2017). The appearance of Russian sourced weaponry is a significant factor that enabled the PMC to switch from its subterfuge tone in Crimea over to its openly aggressive appearance in the Luhansk. The acquisition of sophisticated weaponry was the final pre-requisite for an already battle-hardened and somewhat professional force to take to the frontlines to commence open hostilities. It is with this same combination that paved the way for the Wagner Group to be an elite formation in kinetic engagements that would see them prove vital to operations later during the Syria Civil War.

The Wagner Group's debut on the world stage occurred in the Crimea through the use of subterfuge, misinformation and propaganda facilitated by a major regional player in the form of Russia. The appearance of "polite people" in a seemingly "popular" bloodless annexation which



seized critical infrastructure nodes, paralyzed information operations and cut off large sections of Ukrainian forces from each other, suggests planning, restraint, high levels of intelligence collection and highly disciplined weapons control. This would not have been possible with mere unprofessional ad-hoc “people’s militias”. Additionally, once the theater of focus shifted to the Donbas, these same men were seemingly able to transport themselves with ease which would not have been possible in a Ukraine whose transportation infrastructure was paralyzed at the onset of the crisis. The emergence of the Wagner Group which seamlessly integrated and transformed itself into an elite shock formation in such a short period of time also suggests a Russian patron further evidenced by the weaponry and TTPs displayed once kinetic warfare commenced. This demonstrates that the Wagner Group is a highly trained, highly capable unconventional force which is utilized unconventionally in a low-intensity conflict with enigmatic objectives. This is facilitated by the information battlespace being saturated with misinformation and propaganda. This gives Russia flexibility in applying the PMC for its expansionist policies as it exploits vulnerable states via non-attribution or at least the option to disavow at will. Lastly, the phased utilization of the Wagner Group in Ukraine from one of non-kinetic to kinetic is something that will also be exhibited once again as a regular TTP for the PMCs entrance into a crisis.

### **Case 2: Wagner Group in Syria**

The Bashar Al-Assad regime in Syria, a longstanding ally of Russia, was coming to grips with the culmination of the Arab Spring. The country was plunged into a civil war that is ongoing to this day between the regime and a plethora of factions ranging from jihadist extremist, ISIL to US backed Free Syrian Army (FSA). The destabilized nature of a country rich in resources with significant Russian interest was ripe for the plucking to further evolve and solidify the Russian utilization of PMCs in their “New Type War” doctrine. In addition, Bashar

Al-Assad's Syrian regime is a staunch trading partner for Russia and is a major importer of Russian arms. The collapse of Syria would have dire consequences for the Russian arms industry. Furthermore, with Al Assad out of the picture, it is reasonable to predict that Russian influence would wane as a regime change could turn towards a more pro-Western approach as U.S. military presence in the region as it backed anti-regime forces and the Kurds that battled the Islamic State and Al Qaeda. An unfavorable regime change that could result in pro-Western leanings would serve to further isolate Russia geopolitically, going against the Russian resurgence as part of its grand strategy. Wagner Group's entrance into the conflict allowed al-Assad to stabilize his lines resulting in the country currently largely under regime control. It also allowed Putin to avoid domestic scrutiny due to the low footprint of Russian conventional forces. Not surprising, is the Wagner Group's role at the forefront of this conflict and one which sees the PMC in the same phased implementation as was in its entrance into the world stage in Ukraine. This realizes the Wagner Group as the Russian governments' new foreign policy spear, eventually forming the bulk of Russian ground forces in the war while enjoying the support of regular Russian forces from the air and sea.

Russian involvement officially escalated in 2012 after a failed attempt of a UN mandated ceasefire which proved futile for all parties involved. Russian kinetic involvement began in 2015 after an official request for support by the Bashar Al-Assad regime. On 30 September 2015, the first Russian airstrikes targeted Jaysh al-islam and the US backed FSA. Shortly after, reports of Wagner Group members in Syria started to appear in October 2015. These initial reports were vehemently denied by the Russian government no doubt due to the nebulous understanding of how PMCs are able to operate in a country's constitution that forbids their existence in the first place. This outright denial is further explained when coupled with the fact that the group is

attached to regular Russian forces at the onset of its involvement in a new conflict which would be unpopular had it been officially sanctioned regular ground forces in their stead. As with any nation, putting “boots on the ground” in an overseas war would draw ire from its own citizens. However, the flexibility that a PMC offers in terms of its personnel seemingly devoid of national identity replaced with a multinational one in the guise of capitalism, made its existence easier to swallow. As highlighted from the Wagner Group’s inception in the Crimea, this is the second such instance that the Wagner Group has entered a foreign nation, where Russian interests are aligned, in an undisclosed fashion. Russian Prime Minister Medvedev mentioned that same year that “deployment of ground troops by foreign powers could result in a world war” (DW 2016, n.p.). This statement neglects to take into account Russian PMCs already operating in two foreign conflicts, the Donbas War and Syrian Civil War. This seemingly evasive comment to further cement Russian commitment to avoiding sending regular troops betrays the official stance on PMCs operating in destabilized countries with significant Russian strategic interest and exhibits how PMCs were vital to this New Type War.

Eventually, the Wagner Group was recognized as “advisors and instructors” to Al-Assad regime forces, purely operating in a support capacity (Safak, 2017). This conventional labeling to a PMC operating in a war-torn country is akin to Western notions of PMC utilization in the War against Terror. This was intended to buy time for the Wagner Group to mobilize with all the bells and whistles that the Russian government would support it with on this new adventure. The duration of consolidation and mobilization to eventual escalation of activities by Wagner Group lasted from its first arrival in the area of operations in September 2015 until early 2016 where the PMC spearheaded the first offensive into Palmyra. This period saw low confirmed numbers of Wagner Group members in country as well as limited contact with anti-regime forces (Spark

2016). Indeed, this period does support the supporting role that was initially claimed by the Russian government. However, during the runup to the 2016 Palmyra offensive, the number of Wagner personnel in country amassed to upwards of 2,349 personnel with its high degree of organization and weaponry that emulated a regular military formation. This would eventually swell to a number exceeding 5,000 personnel in 2018 (DonPress, 2018). An organization this large requires an equally well established C2 structure to handle the complexities of bureaucracy in a warzone. According to Fortanka, the Wagner Group in Syria was divided into a hierarchy reminiscent of standard Russian army organization:

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 (*ognevaya podgotovka*), engineer training (*inzhenernaya podgotovka*), tank and infantry fighting vehicle crews (*ekipazi tankov i BMP*), tactical training (*takticheskaya podgotovka*), as well as artillery and anti-air defense.

———(Korotkov, 2017, \_\_\_\_n.p.)

Fortanka further reports that:

“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 allowed Wagner to carry out offensive military operations typically performed by the regular Armed Forces—such examples were observed in Ukraine (2014–2015) and Syria (since 2015) against “unfriendly” forces to the Russian and Syrian regimes.” (Korotkov, 2017, n.p.)

This C2 structure and manpower roughly equates to a full pledge division or brigade for a conventional army unit. Additionally, their equipment at the commencement of the PMCs kinetic activities included a wide range of military hardware that a conventional PMC would not have access to.

While the extent of western counterpart’s heavy weaponry culminated in the durable Mine Resistant Armored Protected (MRAP) vehicle, heavily modified small arms, and

unmanned air surveillance (UAS) for intelligence gathering, the Wagner Group was able to access a wide spectrum which included tanks, infantry fighting vehicles (IFVs) to air defense systems. This effectively enable the Wagner Group to conduct both offensive and defensive operations without relying too much on its Patron. In contrast to the ambiguous nature of how the Wagner Group acquired its armaments in Ukraine, the PMC was able to field the aforementioned substantial heavy weaponry supplied by the Russian defense ministry with little to no attempt at concealment.

In 2015 - 2016, according to participants in the events, training in Molokino took up to two months, ammunition for study was allocated in unlimited quantities, including costly shots to anti-tank missile systems. In Syria, the group received T-72 tanks, BM-21 Grad launchers, 122 mm D-30 howitzer. The States of the sample of the spring of 2016 provided for 2,349 personnel, including four reconnaissance and assault companies, a group command, a tank company, a combined artillery group, reconnaissance and support units.” (RusLetter, 2017, n.p.).

The mentioned “Molokino” training ground otherwise known as the *Krasnodar Krai* is the official training ground for the 10<sup>th</sup> Separate Special Brigade under the GRU. This link highlights that the Wagner Group’s connection with an official arm of the Russian defense ministry is an ongoing one that did not end in its inception and in fact further evolved. Training in the *Krasnodar Krai* usually entails Multiple Rocket Launcher Systems (MLRS), Self-Propelled Guns (SPGs) and Multiple Rocket Launchers (MRLs), among others. Of these categories, the BM-27 MLRS and Tornado G MRL first appeared in the Syrian Civil War during the Wagner Group’s participation in some of the major offensive while the 2S19 Msta-S saw action in the Donbas War (Sukhankin, 2019). It’s important to point out that all mentioned were antiquated Soviet-era weaponry making it difficult to pinpoint the exact origin due to the widespread proliferation during the Cold War. However, Western reporting indicating that these were not in Syrian arsenal prior to the Wagner Group’s appearance in addition to the 2-month training that takes

place at *Krasnodar Krai* prior to deployment makes for a highly likely assessment that these were supplied by the Russian defense ministry (Grani, 2019).

A subject highlighted in the previous Ukraine examination was the Wagner Group's swift reappearance in the Donbas region as the Crimean annexation was consolidated. Its Russian patron more than likely facilitated this logistical feat by extricating the members via sea or air and re-entering the Donbas region from the border in south-eastern Ukraine. We see these two modes again for introducing the Wagner Group in the Syrian theater thereby establishing it as a regular logistics TTP for the PMC. First is by sea by way of Sevastopol, further secured due to the Crimean annexation. The traditional sea route from Sevastopol through the Black Sea to the Russian controlled Lakatia, Syria via the Bosphorus was vital in setting the stage for Wagner's entrance into the country in force. Prior to Russia's 2015 involvement, the extent of Russian involvement consisted of supplies and armaments to the Syrian government via this route. Using this, Armored Personnel Carriers (APCs), IFVs, Electronic Warfare (EW) and advanced Russian Surface to Air Missile (SAM) systems were sold and transferred to Syrian government forces from 2013 – 2015 (Turkishnavy, 2015). The second was via air to which according to Sukhankin

An essential aspect of the Wagner Group's success has been Russia's commitment to provide it with the logistical resources of the entire Southern Federal District (SFD). In particular, Rostov-on-Don has played a strategic role in terms of the development and functioning of Wagner. The city, located in the southern part of the SFD, is effectively one of the key logistical venues in southern Russia. The surrounding 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 of transferring Russian servicemen (both privates and contract soldiers) to Syria via the Cham Wings air company (which also flies civilian Airbus A320s). Most likely, members of the Wagner Group were transferred to Syria via the same scheme, using the Platov International Airport (also in Rostov Oblast)." (Sukhankin, 2019, n.p.).

The fact that Russian equipment primarily transported using the sea route makes it highly likely that the equipment the Wagner Group utilized for their offensives also came via the Tartus port. As already mentioned, personnel primarily flew via the SFD. Both methods require substantial logistical support from the Russian defense ministry, without which would be impossible for a fledgling PMC.

From April 2016 – February 2018, the Wagner Group’s role in the Syrian conflict matured into full-fledged “shock troops” on a vastly higher degree from the same role allotted to them in the Donbas War. Access to heavy weaponry and Russian air support gave the highly organized, heavily armed, experienced personnel the advantage necessary to take to the field and spearhead major combat operations to retake large swathes of territory. Although the Wagner Group’s primary role was to ostensibly safeguard re-acquired vital oil complexes, according to a former member of the PMC, “...it is impossible to control an oil field with the militants [anti-al-Assad forces] being 500 meters away from you—you will have to drive them away by force” (Khazov-Cassia, 2018, n.p.). It is under these operating conditions that the die was cast at the Battle of Khasham.

In the early hours of 8 February 2018, Syrian regime forces were launched in a bid to retake the Conoco oil fields. The Conoco fields rested on the other side of the line of control (LOC) which placed it under US backed Kurdish control. The force would risk drawing the ire of the small US marine detachment if it were to take the oil fields. At the center of this force is the Wagner Group which would play the central role that it has grown accustomed to in previous battles. A significant distinction that needs to be made during this phase of the war is that the Wagner Group was nominally under the control of the Bashar Al-Assad forces. It was now

subsidized mostly by the Syrian regime (Khazov-Cassia, 2018). Along with a reduction in its paycheck, the quality of equipment and aerial support that PMC enjoyed in the initial stages of the war also suffered. Regardless, the Wagner Group was still a highly capable force that enjoyed relative superiority against the myriad of factions that it fought against both in terms of skill and tactics. That morning none of this would aid the Wagner Group and it would thrust the group into the world stage in the infamous battle.

A TTP that has proven effective in paralyzing US armed forces was to quickly close in on their allies, the Kurds, effectively nullifying American firepower for fear of drawing friendly fire. However, the geographic conditions afforded to the pro-regime forces consisted of a large swathe of open desert after crossing the Euphrates on their way to seizing the Conoco oil fields. Furthermore, American Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) assets persistently scoured the sector which ensured optimal situational awareness should the marines be threatened, in short, they were ready. As soon as the force of 600 men crossed the Euphrates with main battle tanks (MBT), IFVs, APCs and SPGs, the detachment became the unfortunate recipients of the full might of American firepower that can be concentrated in the area. American air controllers vectored F-15E fighter bombers, B-52 bombers, AC-130, AH-64 Apache gunships and RPAs to the area and proceeded to pummel the offending force. The Wagner Group did not have MANPADs, air defense systems nor did it have air support that initially enjoyed during the war, quite possibly due to the change in handlers at this juncture. At the same time, even if air support was promised by the Russian Federation, there's little chance the high command a risk an open confrontation with the US military.



There were varying reports on the casualty count incurred by the Wagner Group that ranged from 14 men to 300 men which cannot be confirmed. Understandably, this misadventure wounded the prestige of the elite PMC as a premier fighting force and highlighted the weakness of a poorly supported and planned operation up against a conventional force. This episode shed some light into Russian PMC operations which should be detrimental to Russia's attempt at concealing links with the PMC. In the aftermath of the battle the Russian government disavowed the Wagner Group's action for purportedly not being in the loop on the offensive. However, according to Inform Napalm, the Russian command in charge of the sector was indeed informed and gave clearance for the offensive to be taken (Inform Napalm, 2018). The Russian government continued to deny involvement citing that these were private citizens under the employ of Syria. Despite having Russian nationals enduring setbacks in a foreign war, the domestic outcry was largely mute. The director of Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, Ruslan Pukhov stated that "these people [the Wagner Group] are paid, and they know exactly what they are getting into" (Pukhov, 2017, n.p.). This underwhelming response on the domestic front exhibits a success in some ways of Russia's "New Type War". As was in Ukraine with the possible shutdown of commercial airliners and military aircraft, plausible deniability was an option afforded using Wagner Group for Russian foreign policy. In the Khasham case, it was successfully implemented due to lack of outcry from the resulting Russian blood on foreign soil.

The phased evolution of Wagner Group's involvement in Syria can draw parallels to Ukraine. Initially denied by the Russian government as being in country and the relegated by the as simple advisors and instructors in the conflict, the PMC evolved into a full-fledged fighting force rivalling conventional forces in size, organization, and equipment capable of spearheading

major operations. Their prowess on the battlefield contributed significantly to pro-Assad forces stabilizing the front lines and consolidating control over most of the country as of 25 March 2021 (Ponomarenko, 2018). As it is in Ukraine, support from their Russian patron was instrumental to the Wagner Group's successful deployment in Syria in terms of logistics. However, the degree of discreetness for this movement can be seen as being lower due to the Assad regime's official contracts with the company and subsequent nominal control over the PMC. Additionally, the battle of Khasham, regardless of tactical outcome proved the flexibility of this "invisible army" with the indifference shown by the Russian public to the defeat. In the end, the same TTPs developed in Ukraine was utilized in Syria, a destabilized country where Russia has a large economic appetite, thus exerting influence and expanding through the utilization of these unconventional warriors.

### **Case 3: Wagner Group in the Central Africa Republic (CAR)**

In 2018, Russia was granted approval by the United Nations to sell light arms to the Central Africa Republic (CAR) (Dynamics, 2021). This enabled an influx of weaponry to the beleaguered nation, a failed state with has been battling up to 14 different rebel groups that have taken control of 2/3 of the country as the latest civil war that intensified in 2013. Outside the capital city of Bangui, President Touadera's administration has little to no control over the rest of the country. UN peacekeepers in the form of MINUSCA and their former colonial master, France, have deployed and attempted to stabilize the country from 2013 to 2016. For their part, the French withdrew from the embattled country due to widespread allegations of rape by its deployed troops. MINUSCA on the other hand, is still in country but has made little impact due to its stretched manpower and resources. President Touadera required a different solution and at

a UN council meeting, he met with President Putin on the sidelines where the two leaders reached an agreement for Russian support. As it was in the previous two cases, the Wagner Group was up front and center.

As in Syria and Ukraine, Russian expansion into the CAR was not borne out of altruism. The CAR is a diamond and gold rich country. Resources that the Wagner Group has secured contracts through the use of subsidiary companies connected to the shadowy Wagner leadership such as Prigozhin. In addition to his links to Wagner Group, Prigozhin owns a mining company called Lobye Invest that operates in the CAR. The Wagner Group has since secured three airfields beyond government-controlled territories, all of which “strategically located to export natural resources extracted from mining sites and conflict minerals purchased on the black market. In addition to Lobaye’s receipt of exploratory rights in six mines following the initial deal with President Touadéra, in September 2018 the *New York Times* reported that “Russian contractors” were digging in diamond sites near Birao.” (Searcey, 2019, n.p.). While resources are certainly at play for Russian interest in the country, CAR is also being used “as a springboard for expanded influence in Central Africa” (Ramani, 2021, n.p.). In addition to the CAR, Russian PMCs that include the Wagner Group have been reported multiple times to be in the Sudan and the Republic of Congo. In short, Russian PMC use in Africa is one that has a decidedly less volatile footprint due to largely protecting economic interests rather than full scale military operations. At the same time the Wagner Group is utilized as political capital, being used as a bridgehead to expand Russian influence through gestures of limited military support, with the PMC provided with little heavy equipment making it impossible to conduct large scale offensives. The PMCs involvement also

provides as a discreet flexible option should the involvement be a tactical and strategic blunder in the long run.

Wagner Group in the CAR is the latest in the evolution of the PMC's utilization by the Russian government, demonstrating a new stage in the PMC's evolution. The low intensity conflict that is ongoing at the heart of Africa represents a new operating environment to a group that is now well known for its organization and TTPs akin to a regular shock formation. Essentially, the conflict is fought across country with mostly infantry units with very little organization and guerilla hit and run attacks as the norm. Although, there are lines of control demarcating territories, the jungled geographic battlespace makes it easy to hide troop movements making decisive engagements few and rare. This, in effect, created a deadlock between the various factions and the Touadera government where all factions are too weak to gain the upper hand. This complex geographic and political scenario is not unlike the operating environment that the Wagner Group operated in Syria and Ukraine.

The major difference is the scale of conflict with the available weaponry involved. As such, from the Wagner Group's first appearance in the country, they have been relegated to that of instructors and trainers of Touadera's beleaguered forces. This relative inactivity is still in line with the first phase of the PMC's involvement that's already observed in other theaters of operation. The absence of heavy weaponry, Russian air support and general chaos wrought about by the fog of war that the group previously operated in, is a new challenge and one that sees the Wagner Group used in a primarily support function to CAR security forces. This could be due to the fact that the conflict has yet to achieve the phase of war where the Wagner Group would be unleashed in kinetic fashion. However, as of 2021, there are no indications that any such

mobilization on the scale of Syria and Ukraine is forthcoming. International assessments of in country Order of Battle (OB) for both sides amount to light and heavy small arms with little in the form of heavy weaponry such as MBTs, SPGs or artillery. However, Russian support eventually came with additions to Touadera's OB such as:

...weaponry and munition to the local government, whose level of sophistication is growing. If initially Moscow was primarily delivering dated types of light weaponry, it has started sending heavy equipment since 2019. Specifically, in October 2020, two batches (the overall number was not specified) of BRDM-2 amphibious armored patrol cars arrived in the CAR. A month later, another batch of BRDM-2 was delivered, which was officially confirmed by the Russian Deputy Minister of Defense, Alexander Fomin. In his comment, Fomin stated that the armored vehicles (the number of pieces was not specified) were sent to the CAR as part of a "major reform of the local security sector". His statement essentially confirmed Russia's growing involvement in the local defense architecture. (Sukhankin, 2021, n.p.)

To date, there have been 20 known BRDM-2s delivered to the CAR (Dynamics, 2021). These amphibious armored patrol cars are dated Soviet-era vehicle that provide little protection from other forms of heavy arms that the anti-government forces have. While this contribution has done little to change the tide of the conflict, it's important to note that delivery of Former Soviet-Union (FSU) era equipment, wherever Russians decide to wage it's New-Type War, is common. This was observed in Syria and Ukraine which coincided with the Wagner Group's arrival. In the CAR instance, however, the PMC does not have nominal control over the hardware nor its employment, this task is reserved for CAR security forces which the PMC was busy training. Thus, in the CAR's unique case, this deployment of obsolete weaponry is largely a symbolic gesture. This gesture is also a financially viable one in line with previous deployments of the Wagner Group. The low-cost application of putting PMC "boots on the ground" is not only a financially cost-effective way of having a ground presence in the CAR, in comparison to sending regular armed forces, it is also a politically appetizing one. As already witnessed in the wake of

the Battle of Khasham, the consequences of a tactical blunder that cost PMC lives is minimal in terms of the domestic backlash. Due to the proven plausible deniability application that the Wagner Group has provided to Russian foreign policy, this new operating environment is one that is fitting for the PMC. Thus, the symbolic gesture could also serve as a warning their new adversaries, a harbinger of the next stage of PMC involvement as well as the level of commitment that the Russian government has at this stage of the conflict.

Initial reports of Russians in country were denied by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). As noted from the previous case studies, this is common TTP for the entrance of the infamous PMC into an unstable nation ripe for Russian exploitation. This initial denial, as previously observed, is the standard attempt to control the narrative painting the transaction as primarily a private one devoid of Russian governmental influence. However, the presence of one Valeriy Zakharov, President Touadera's Russian National Security Advisor, betrays this statement at the onset. Zakharov was a former GRU official that took up his post in CAR at the request of President Touadera and has since been an integral part of Touadera's cabinet. This Russian influence close to the seat of power undoubtedly benefits Russian ambitions in the region. In addition to the obvious implication of the previously explored GRU links to the PMC, Russian media outlet Znak reported that:

the Wagner Group operated a facility in Krasnodar which trained PMCs for combat in CAR. The Russian Foreign Ministry admits to a military presence [in CAR] and claims that Russia wishes to 'strengthen the national security units of CAR' and secure mutually beneficial mining contracts. (Schreck, 2018, n.p.).

Again, the inextricable link between GRU, the Russian defense ministry's intelligence arm, and the Wagner Group can be seen as no mere coincidence. This eventual Russian MFA acknowledgement came with an announcement that that 5 military advisors with 170 "civilian

instructors” would be deployed to help train CAR security forces (Anisimova, 2020, n.p.). Despite the official statement, news reports and videos showing members identification as Wagner Group personnel surfaced (Searcey, 2019). Some of these were shown on official broadcasts and interviews depicting Russian speaking masked men next to CAR political elites, including Touadera himself. Personnel from the PMC was also responsible for protecting supply convoys coming from neighboring Sudan as well as protecting vital facilities such as airports and mining complexes. This indicates that Wagner Group has expanded their repertoire to more traditional western notions of PMC roles and one that paid off for President Touadera during the 2020 coup which the Wagner Group helped prevent (Edwards, 2021, n.p.).

On December 2021, Russian personnel in CAR was further expanded by 300 regular military personnel along with heavy weaponry in a bid to protect Touadera’s regime (BBC, 2021). This was in response to indications and warnings showing that the latest in a long line of the country’s history of coup-d’états was expected to occur during President Touadera’s re-election bid. The surge in foreign troops into CAR was successful and the coup was unsuccessful. Russia then announced the withdrawal of the additional troops in January 2021 which is still unrealized as of March 2021. There are an estimated 450 - 2000 Wagner Group personnel in country as of March 2021 according to Edwards (2021). In effect, the coup provided a viable reason that further expanded Wagner Group’s footprint in the CAR. Perhaps this is in further anticipation of Wagner Group’s increased role in the next phase of the conflict. There are already unconfirmed reports of human rights violations committed by the PMC or militias that the group practice interoperability with as well as reports that the PMC being is now directly involved in combat against anti-government forces. As evidence of this, the Wagner Group was involved in killing 44 rebels on 26 January (RFI 2021). Perhaps this is further indication that

proven TTPs on the Wagner Group's road to mobilization and major operations in the CAR will be unveiled soon.

### **Conclusion**

Wagner Group's activities and all three cases show us distinct phases in which the PMC is utilized. Through an examination of how the Russian government supports its logistics, training, C2 structure and its limits on the field, I have gleaned a possible standard roadmap for how the PMC is utilized. Established TTPs in all three cases show gradual escalation that exhibit the discreet entrance of the Wagner Group in a politically unstable environment ripe with conflict. This is facilitated by an information warfare campaign in Ukraine, as well as a lack of official attribution to Russia in both Syria and CAR. Next, one sees the mobilization of the Wagner Group that point to significant Russian government logistical support and an emulation of the Russian armed force's organizational structure in order to support the escalation of combat roles seen in the Donbas and Syria. FSU based tactics and equipment then appear in the embattled country as a low-cost alternative to regular Russian armed force modern weaponry as well as a low risk-high reward gesture to the supported country. These are then either used by the Wagner Group or, as is the currently the case with CAR, given to local security forces. Shortly afterwards, an escalation of combat operations occurs in which the PMC is utilized as a shock formation or elite infantry unit that becomes central in major battles. As already mentioned, the Wagner Group's participation was pivotal in the Debaltseve and Luhansk Airport battles which stabilized the pro-Russian front in the Donbas region. In Syria, this was demonstrated again during the Palmyra offensives, crucial steppingstones for Assad forces re-gaining control over most of the country. The latter case does have the infamous incident around the Khasham region



in which the Wagner Group seemed to have bit off more than it could chew. While the tactical defeat did expose some glaring miscalculations on the PMC's part, the aftermath of which proved a successful application of the plausible deniability option that an illegal PMC offers to Russia.

There's little doubt of the murky nature of how the Wagner Group came to be essential to a nation that considers it illegal. The confusion that this presents to the world stage is puzzling to the West. This can be partially explained by the need to keep the PMC at arm's length in case activities of questionable legality are required to be employed or any high-risk venture that could potentially cause diplomatic blow backs over sensitive areas that the PMCs are employed. In the Khasham case, there's evidence that Russian high command in Syria was fully aware of the positions of the US and should they feel threatened, the high risk involved in operating in close proximity. The *Washington Post* reported that according to leaked US intelligence documents, the shady Putin affiliated patron of the Wagner Group, "Prigozhin was in touch with the Kremlin repeatedly throughout the time of the attack, and indeed that Prigozhin had bragged to the Syrians that some kind of fast and strong move would happen this time frame, so it is likely that the Kremlin knew what was happening" (Marten, 2019, pg. 195). Furthermore, during an interaction with Congress, Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis stated that "the Russian high command in Syria assured us it was not their people" (Marten, 2019, pg. 194). It is possible that during the hours or even days prelude to the episode, where both sides intelligence apparatus would be observing the lines of control, Russian high command saw that an opportunity presented itself. Wagner Group being central to the attacking Syrian force that "that Moscow wanted to test the mettle and endurance of the US presence in Syria by challenging it on the sly, using Wagner as a proxy" (Marten, 2019, pg. 195). Over time, plausible deniability for such

high-profile actions became difficult to maintain due to photos and videos of Wagner members being in the presence of Russia's political elite during funerals for members killed in action or awarding of military decorations, preceding actions which were never explained. Regardless, as mentioned from the Syrian case, domestic blowback was minimal with the majority of Russian citizenry giving tacit approval for the Wagner Group as a suitable as well as completely acceptable expendable proxy for regular Russian units.

In CAR, this flexibility is still being practiced albeit at a lower risk due to the conflict's lower degree of intensity. To date, the Wagner Group is still unacknowledged as the primary PMC in country with up to 2,000 members (Edwards, 2021). Evidence for Wagner members being positively identified is bountiful with witness testimonies from former members and investigative journalists corroborating members training at the Krasnodai Krai GRU facilities prior to arriving (Sukhankin, 2021). Acquired photos of Wagner members also show them "providing personal security for President Faustin-Archange Touadera and his administration [as well as] providing security for [Russian operated mines linked to Prigozhin]" (Mironenko, 2018, n.p.). Furthermore, a St. Petersburg based company called M-Invest which is linked to Prigozhin is reported to be the parent company for Lobaye Invest, a mining company that secured contracts from Touadera's government (Edwards, 2021). Russia's continued attempt at distancing itself from the Wagner Group in a country that it operates in, even though it is clear that links to GRU is evident, points to the fact that plausible deniability is significant to continued utilization of PMCs in unstable countries. This is despite the fact the clear political goals are still nebulous, in its place questions arise into Prigozhin's and the Wagner Group's profiteering making them more akin to mercenaries. However, it is important to point out that Prigozhin's rise could be due in part to informal connections to Putin's circle in the early years of Wagner's predecessors. This

then leads to Russian involvement in CAR as more of an opportunistic private enterprise rather than one of a rational state actor. Regardless, the ambiguous legality of the group affords the Russian government options for it to either disavow the group at first sign of an unfavorable outcome, which we saw in Syria, or to pull on the reigns by prosecuting members of the group should Prigozhin's profiteering be deemed an expense to the Russian state. Both options are facilitated by the PMC's murky legal status within the Russian constitution. All options on the table, we see that the Wagner Group's becomes versatile in both the political arena and the battlefield.

The other revelation presented by these case studies is the evolution of the Wagner Group and a pattern or roadmap to war that the PMC has been utilized. As illustrated, the phases at which the Wagner Group will be utilized can be broken up by three distinct stages: Initial infiltration which consist of controlling the information battlespace, foreign internal defense operations as well as mobilization and lastly by spearheading major offensive operations. In the Crimea, the first phase of infiltration consisted of a campaign of disinformation and propaganda that paralyzed the Ukrainian military and put PMC personnel in place eventually making their way to the Donbas. This was then organized rather quickly under the Wagner banner which quickly transitioned into the last phase by participating in major combat operations that enabled significant victories for the pro-Russian forces. In Syria, the initial influx of Wagner personnel was also initially denied, thus disseminating misinformation and sowing confusion. These personnel then assisted host nation members in training and small-scale actions which then transitioned into the last stage of major operations at the 2<sup>nd</sup> battle of Palmyra finally culminating in the battle of Khasham. The Central African Republic presents a different scenario at first glance due to the nature of the conflict which lacked heavy weaponry across the landscape and

geography that would prove difficult to maneuver should said weaponry be present. However, upon closer inspection, the conflict seemed to be at an earlier stage making the Wagner Group's being in the 2<sup>nd</sup> phase of instructing and advising appropriate. This is also facilitated by the static nature of the conflict in contrast to the fluid lines of control that have been experienced in both Syria and Ukraine. While the Wagner Group did scale up in personnel to prevent a coup, the equipment necessary to effectively take the offensive and lead large scale operations is still lacking. It could be that the Wagner Group has yet to enter its last phase of participating in offensive operations with some indications that point in that direction as inevitable. A prelude to this is gradual integration and interoperability with host nation forces that have been seen in Syria. Reports of this are already appearing as well as small scale operations where Wagner Group members participated in. Evidence for this is the 44 rebel members killed in a joint-operation where Russian PMC personnel were involved (RFI, 2021). Unfortunately, further proof can be obtained by uncorroborated reports of human rights abuses conducted by PMC personnel which was reported by the UN (UN News, 2021). Reports of similar actions were also attributed to Wagner Group personnel in the Syrian theater (Kramer, 2021).

Tied to the deployments of the PMC are the national interests of the Russian state. In this we see that the objective for each foray into the three different nations differ depending on certain factors that range from proximity to Russia, religious extremism or what seems to individual opportunism. Each of which, save for the CAR, have resulted in semi-favorable circumstances for Russia as it has achieved its main objectives in the midst of the instability that each country is suffering. In the Ukraine, the PMC facilitated the annexation of the Crimea, in effect the return of Sevastopol to Russian control as well as prolonging or preventing Ukraine's entrance into the EU. Syria saw the PMC utilized to its full combat capabilities as it helped

stabilize the Assad regime thus preventing a possible pro-Western regime change. All the while, giving Russia plausible deniability. In the CAR, it appears that the Wagner Group has given Russia a footprint in Africa as well securing mining rights for a resource that Russian companies currently holds a significant share of the global diamond market. It's still too early to see how exactly the Wagner Group will be fully utilized in the CAR as the PMC's capabilities are currently limited to advisory and defense roles. Future analysis on the seemingly new phase that the PMC is entering could yield more fidelity to Russian designs in the region.

The Wagner Group has been sighted in nearly all Russian foreign adventure since 2013. As already mentioned, these theaters of conflict put Russian political elite with ties to GRU or Prigozhin as being active in country. The inextricable link that the Wagner Group has with GRU is a distinct connection that the PMC acts at the behest of Russian foreign policy. Though the case of CAR is unique due to the perceived personal gains that the PMC's patron enjoys, the opportunities that the low-cost foothold the Wagner Group has set up for Russia in the heart of Africa cannot be ignored. Furthermore, the PMCs' reliance on GRU training facilities, Russian armed forces mobility assets, as well as its C2 structure is further evidence that the PMC would not be able to operate as it does without Russian state backing. This link makes plausible deniability an indispensable option that would be restricted should the Wagner Group's legal status become clear. This also helps facilitate the initial and enduring misinformation campaign that heralds the PMCs arrival at any location giving the Russian people the appetite for proxies to its conventional forces. All combined, it is undeniable that the Wagner Group has become an essential tool in how Russia wages its new-type war. A hybrid war ripe with confusion and dependent on the information battlespace.

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