

ARE THE RUSSIANS COMING? MOSCOW'S MERCENARIES IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Timothy J. Colton, Harvard University



The Russians Are Coming, the Russians Are Coming, Norman Jewison's 1966 movie in Panavision, captured the fear at the height of the Cold War that the Russians – the Soviets in those days – were on the move and had the West on the run. In the same picture frame, the klutziness of crewmembers from a Soviet submarine, run aground on a New England sandbar, subtly demystified the threat.

This paper, focused on Vladimir Putin's post-Soviet Russia, borrows gingerly from the spirit of Jewison – a Canadian artist, by the way – five decades down the road. We are obliged to take seriously the Russian activities at hand, and the nontrivial challenge they pose. The key

task is to come up with an assessment, of what is very much a moving target, that is empirically grounded, comparatively valid, and nuanced. It needs to be updatable in light of fresh information and to eschew the hype (of the “dogs of war” genre) that flavors all too many press accounts on our side of the water.

TERMINOLOGY AND CONTEXT

“Mercenary” derives from the Latin *mercenaries*, for “one who does anything for pay.” Unlike their opposite numbers sporting uniforms and badges, mercenary warriors are “motivated essentially by private gain,” and not by patriotism, professionalism, or the quest for martial glory (Singer, 2003, p. 41). “Essentially” means first and foremost, not exclusively. As it is with soldiers in any setting, there is some room for layering of goals,¹ so long as it is understood in this specific context that private gain is paramount.

Alternative terms abound in the expert literature:²

- “Privatized military firms” or PMFs, Peter Singer’s phrase in his pathbreaking *Corporate Warriors* (Singer, 2003). A variation is “private military contractors” or PMCs.
- “Private military and security companies,” which gives us PMSCs. This is the wording of the landmark Montreux Document (Montreux Document, 2008). Coproduced by the Swiss government and the International Committee of the Red Cross, the Document laid out best practices relating private military companies to a humanitarian agenda, coming up shy of hard and fast rules. Canada and the United States were among the seventeen original signatories; thirty-nine countries have joined in since 2008, bringing the total to fifty-six.
- “Non-state armed actors” or groups, as favored by the German peace scholars Claudia Hofmann and Ulrich Schneckener (Hofmann & Schneckener, 2011).
- “Semi-state security forces” or “‘semi-state’ informal security organizations.” “Semi-state” is the formulation of Kimberly Marten, an American specialist on Russian

¹ Career soldiers in the all-volunteer U.S. and Canadian forces enlist for a variety of reasons, among which, depending on the individual, are love of country and financial stability if not affluence. One thing recruiters pitch is preparation in military service for post-military careers (U.S. Army, 2019): “No matter which career path you choose, the experience you receive in the U.S. Army will give you a framework for success. You will have the opportunity to train and achieve a certification in almost any career path. You will be given hands-on training, and you will be expected to carry more responsibility than you would starting out in a comparable civilian job. You will also gain leadership skills and a work ethic that can only come with a background in the military.”

² The somewhat related “proxy warfare” is beyond the purview of the present paper. See Ahram (2011), Innes (2012), and Mumford (2013).

military affairs, for whom it steals a march on “non-state” because the latter exaggerates the distance between the organizations and officialdom (Marten, 2019a, 2019b).

- “Paramilitaries” or “paramilitary companies,” expressions favored by some journalists.

“Mercenaries” at the end of the day has the virtue of simplicity and sidesteps the verbal clutter and hair-splitting represented in the list above.³ As is par for the course, neither it nor any of the alternatives maps the terrain cleanly. Penciling in lines around the actors “has proven difficult owing to their many types and characteristics” (Hofmann & Schneckener, 2011, p. 2). “Despite the glut of attention lavished on this topic,” writes Sean McFate of the Atlantic Council (McFate, 2014), “there still is no common definition, typology, or understanding of who exactly is a member of the industry”; demarcation terms are used casually and interchangeably, “sowing further conceptual disorder” (p. 10). For the purpose of branding, “mercenary” (with its uncomplimentary buzz) and in many quarters the more value-free “military” have lately been eschewed by players in the market.⁴

Hofmann and Schneckener (Hofmann & Schneckener, 2011) give a concise and sensible checklist of the fundamentals. “Generally speaking, non-state armed groups are ... distinctive organizations that are (i) willing and capable to use violence for pursuing their objectives and (ii) not integrated into formalized state institutions such as regular armies, presidential guards, police, or special forces. They, therefore, (iii) possess a certain degree of autonomy with regard to politics, military operations, resources, and infrastructure” (p. 2).

Reasoning about mercenaries, regardless of the label, is enriched and complicated by a prehistory stretching back millennia. The ancient Greeks, Alexander the Great, Carthage, Rome, Byzantium, Renaissance Venice and Florence, George III – all relied on legionnaires for hire to wield sword, cannon, and musket on behalf of the ruling group. Machiavelli in the sixteenth century acknowledged the *condottieri*'s omnipresence even as he vilified them as “useless and dangerous” due to their fluctuating loyalties. The French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars triggered a seemingly irrevocable turnabout. Mass forces, enlisted involuntarily and deploying easily mastered weapons, took over European battlefields, seeing “the wars of kings ... evolve into the wars of people” (Singer, 2003, p. 29).

³ Readers who want to pursue definitional questions further can consult Percy (2007) and Isenberg (2009).

⁴ Companies came to realize after 2000 that if they were to bid for government contracts, “they could not afford to have their image tainted by association with the mercenary companies that operated in Africa during the he 1990s” (Østensen & Bukkvoll, 2018).

Recent decades have brought a dramatic swing back toward private ways. Today's warfare is no longer the monopoly or near-monopoly of the legions of state. The door is increasingly open to players, of varying composition and purpose, bound chiefly by the promise of material reward and not by offices or obligations of state. "The private military market," in Singer's words (Singer, 2003), "has expanded in a way not seen since the 1700s" (p. 40). This "neomedievalism," as McFate dubs it, has not gone so far as to replace modern, state-administered military forces in their entirety, but in many locales is closely interknit with them, and is a presence in practically all major interstate and intrastate quarrels and in many minor ones. We are now, it might be said, well into an age of wars of entrepreneurs.

To speak of military contractors as a class, one estimate for four or five years ago was of 625,000 personnel worldwide ("Top 8 international private contractor companies," 2015); the figure can only have increased since then.⁵ The United States has been the trailblazer in this transformation. An astonishing 72 percent of its military workforce in Afghanistan and Iraq in 2019 are civilian contractors; in an earlier generation, they counted for 10 percent in World War II. The lion's share of these workers furnish "base support," other nonlethal services (e.g., equipment maintenance, construction, transport and communications, translation, ordnance disposal, training), and mundane goods (food, weapons, uniforms, vehicles, and so forth). The U.S. superpower could not get through the day without them. Without contractor backup, researchers for the Congressional Research Service recognize, it "would be currently unable to arm and field an effective fighting force" (Schwartz, Sargent, & Mann. 2018, p. 1).

The scope of the programmatic objectives met by private companies can be narrow or broad, with the ultimate in breadth being DynCorp International's undertaking in Liberia to craft from scratch, after a lengthy civil war, a spanking new national army. "The contract for the new army was issued [in 2004] and paid for by the United States, and it is the first time in one hundred fifty years that one state has hired a company to raise another state's armed forces" (McFate, 2014, p. 99).

To be sure, armed staff who actually shoot at a foe – "tooth" rather than "tail," in military jargon – have spoken for less than 20 percent of the contractor workforce (of those in the employ of U.S.-based firms). "But size does not matter when it comes to armed contractors. Even though they are fewer in number than their unarmed brethren, their actions resonate disproportionately more loudly, owing to the nature of their work: they kill people" (McFate, 2014, p. 33). Moreover, unarmed employees are hard to separate from the weapons-bearing, inasmuch as they live cheek by jowl with them and are indispensable to

⁵ Numbers like this are at best approximations of the truth, even for the relatively open United States government. Regrettably, "True global statistics on private security contractor use do not currently exist" (Private Security Monitor).

the application of deadly force. They are also fully open to the perils of the battlefield – having outnumbered the uniformed military among U.S. fatalities in Afghanistan and Iraq since 2010 – and in their own right have to be provisioned, clothed, guarded, ferried about, etc.

As has been said, most private warriors in the fast-expanding global market were originally directed by Americans and headquartered in the United States, often nested within enormous international corporations. Eighty percent of the labor force on the ground, albeit, were non-Americans, either local hires or “third-country nationals.” Upstart rivals are now shuffling the deck, having proliferated on every continent but Antarctica.⁶

This dynamic of uninterrupted growth is multicausal. Constants do not get us terribly far toward illuminating it, since they are unsuited to explaining variation over time. Singer, for instance (Singer, 2003), highlights private firms’ freeriding on the costly grooming of personnel courtesy of the government. “A state’s military might invest hundreds of thousands of dollars to recruit, train, and retrain each individual soldier. PMFs [privatized military firms] can quickly pull the same services from the open market for a fraction of the cost,” and indeed can do publicity “based on the past battlefield achievements” of employees during their years in uniform (p. 74). This bonanza would hypothetically have been available in 1950 or 1975, years before the explosion of Singer’s PMFs.

A similar constant is the ability of non-state fighters, unencumbered by red tape and disclosure requirements, to ensure their sponsors confidentiality and deniability. As was remarked in one study of U.K.-based firms (Overton, Benevilli, & Bruun, 2018):

The industry is marked by a high turnover of companies; businesses are formed and then dissolved a short while later. This practice might be to create companies to [pursue] certain projects, but it adds to the impenetrable nature of this sector, where so much is opaque and seemingly unaccountable. Elsewhere, companies owned by the same director offered completely different services. A clear pattern of disguised addresses ... appeared from our research. We found three companies ... registered at the same address that turned out to be a Polish restaurant. When contacted, one of the companies admitted that it did not operate from this location and that it was a “virtual office,” owing to “security concerns.” Other contractors shared the same addresses as media or housing

⁶ Examples would be G4S Security Solutions, Corps Security, and Aegis Defence Services (U.K.); ICTS International (Israel); Defion Internacional (Peru); Unity Resources Group (Australia); Seneca (Ireland); Prosegur (Spain); Erinys International (Cyprus); TSU Protection Services (South Africa); GardaWorld (Canada); and the twenty or so Chinese companies securing the One Belt One Road initiative, as described in Arduino, (2018). G4S, which has many divisions other than its security branch, is said to be third in the world in the number of employees in a private firm.

companies. At least 32 companies turned out to be using such virtual offices, allowing companies, for a fee, to use a “prestigious” address (i.e., a City of London postcode) without actually operating from there. One of the service providers ... used by at least six military and security companies, promotes its services by saying virtual addresses “can add to the authenticity of your new company because it looks like you have offices within a busy business hub.”

There is no denying the ubiquity of secrecy and deception in the fighting-for-profit sector, but, again, that does not explain why it has surged to such an extent since the 1990s.

In accounting for the turn toward privatization, then, the narrative of recent history is the best place to start. A preliminary wave was unleashed post–Cold War by the demobilization of hordes of soldiers and the sudden availability of sophisticated hardware in “a huge yard sale of weaponry” (Singer, 2003, 54). Freelancers, acting solo or in gangs – B- or C-list gunmen might not be too uncharitable a descriptor – had a hand in copious local clashes in the 1990s, primarily in but not limited to Africa. It was not unusual for them to cater to clients on both sides of a given conflict.

This leap forward coincided with the appearance of dozens of new but weak states in the developing world, more often than not lacking the wherewithal and expertise to stand up effectual national armies. In the hegemonic West, it coincided with sharp cutbacks in defense budgets, which incentivized policymakers to farm out responsibility to others at the cheapest possible price. Most significant in the advanced democracies was the seismic shift toward reliance on private corporations and public-private partnerships to provide what hitherto had been construed as public goods. Celebrating efficiency, flexibility, and risk transfer, the new gospel surged through sector after sector – corrections, airport operations, road maintenance, mail delivery, schooling, waste collection and disposal, satellite launches, and overseas development assistance, to name a few. Government itself, Allison Stanger notes about the U.S. (Stanger, 2009), was a willing accomplice in that it “furthered the cross-dressing craze by outsourcing whatever it can to the private sector” (p. 2).

In the military and security realm, Erik Prince, the controversial founder of Blackwater (now known as Academi), epitomized the newly prevalent ethos. “I saw my growing company,” he was to say in his memoir *Civilian Warriors* (Prince, 2013) “as ... a way to benefit the armed forces in all sorts of ways, without all the bureaucracy ... Where the Pentagon needs a hundred men to get it done, a private company can do it with ten. Blackwater, I figured, could be the FedEx to the DoD’s [Department of Defense’s] postal service.” Love of the Smithian invisible hand apart, Prince freely admitted that Blackwater’s balance sheet was never far from his thoughts. “The approach benefited the Pentagon – and it benefited our

bottom line” (p. 91). A comparable commercialism underpins the worldview of private military contractors in most other home countries.

The limited social science on military-related privatization yields no consensus about the net effects on war fighting and the international order. Deborah Avant, in *The Market for Force* (Avant, 2005), finds variation to be the rule: “Privatization sometimes leads to greater capabilities, other times to lesser capabilities, and sometimes leads to more, sometimes less integration of violence with prevailing international values” (p. 6).⁷ Molly Dunigan and Ulrich Petersohn argue persuasively (Dunigan & Petersohn, 2015) that national and subnational markets for force, which generate the demand for organized violence, are tremendously diverse: “The market for force is actually a conglomerate of different types of markets rather than a simple neoliberal entity” (p. 2). Relations with state players also turn out to be complex and resistant to generalization (Hofmann & Schneckener, 2011). Private actors “may [be] instrumentalized by state actors either secretly or openly, as happens often with militias, paramilitaries, mercenaries, or private military companies ... There may also be state officials or state agencies directly or indirectly involved in the activities of non-state armed actors – sometimes for ideological reasons (e.g. secret support for rebels), sometimes because of personal interests (such as political career, corruption, family or clan ties, clientelism, and profit) ... [Ties with private warriors] ... may be attractive for some government agencies precisely because of their non-state character” (p. 3).

THE RUSSIANS START TO PAY FOR WAR FIGHTING

The accelerants of spontaneous privatization after the Cold War – demobilization, the yard sale of weaponry, and reconceptualization – applied in spades to Russia and the newly independent states flanking it. Russia and the post-Soviet space played no small part in the scruffy phase of the market’s development. Singer recounted in the early 2000s (Singer, 2003) that “more than 30,000 Russian mercenaries have fought in the various wars in the former Soviet Union and more than 2,000 Russians fought in the former Yugoslavia” (p. 37). His lightly sourced statistics are no better than educated guesses,⁸ but Singer is on solid ground in saying that sizable numbers of freebooters from the former Soviet Union saw action in the 1990s in places like Moldova, Georgia, Tajikistan, and Russia’s Chechnya province. Some subscribed to dodgy night private companies; others were grouped into “volunteer detachments,” on occasion donning the mantle of latter-day Cossacks (the non-

⁷ See also Dunigan (2011).

⁸ Singer’s one cited source is the English translation of a Russian newspaper article published in early 1993. The author of that article would have had no way of knowing precise numbers, and in any event armed conflict in the former Soviet Union and the Balkans was still at an early stage in 1993.

state guardians of the outer edge of the Russian Empire). Central coordination from Moscow was minimal and the bills were settled by and large by local actors.⁹

Just how many of the “Russian mercenaries” happened to be ethnic Russians or citizens of the Russian Federation, as distinct from denizens of other post-Soviet states, is impossible to say. Singer himself (Singer, 2003) refers to “Ukrainian mercenaries ... rumored to have been active” in fourteen hotspots, half of them in Africa (p. 44). Virtually all of these individuals would have been fluent in the Russian language, would have served in the Soviet military, and would have been hard to the naked eye to tell apart from their Russian expatriots.

Long-overdue changes to personnel practices within the Russian military establishment compounded the taxonomic confusion. In the wake of the ill-starred first round of fighting in separatist Chechnya, from 1994 to 1996, the Ministry of Defense began to experiment with volunteer “contract soldiers” – *voyennosluzhashchiye po kontraktu*, customarily shortened to *kontratniki* – who, it was believed, would be better prepared, more accommodating, and more trustworthy in hazardous environments than green and undermotivated draftees. In May 1998 a federal law authorizing contract work was adopted. A *New York Times* correspondent, Michael Gordon, who dropped in on Russian forces in Grozny in February 2000, with the second Chechen war raging, came up against numerous soldiers whom he described, with some license, as “down-on-their-luck mercenaries unable to find steady work at home” (Gordon, 2000).

Because it is so desperate for experienced soldiers, the Russian military hires them for six-month or yearlong periods, paying many times more than a conscript receives. It was an entirely unheard-of practice during Soviet times and part of the wild capitalism that is practiced now in Russia. The *kontratniki* ... are not the professional career soldiers that typify Western armies. They are more like mercenaries. They are older than the conscripts and better trained when it comes to using weapons. In Chechnya, they are said to make up about a third of all Russian troops. They have also been linked to many of the cases of looting, drunkenness, and attacks against civilians, which is not surprising since they are generally rowdy men, excited by violence and serving for relatively brief periods and only for pay.

It spoke to the Kremlin’s unnerved calculus that contract fighters in Chechnya, Gordon was informed, drew 25,000 rubles a month (about \$900 at the time), a fabulous sum in 2000.

⁹ Writing at the time, Thomas Goltz (1993, p. 98) painted Russian meddling in neighboring countries, including that working through Cossack-themed groups as “ugly and obscure.” He had not been able to find “a smoking gun” in terms of central direction, “though there are bullet casings lying all around.” Quite a few of the incidents he described involved Russian military units officially stationed in the given country.

(All dollar figures in this papers are in U.S. currency). Monthly base pay for conscripts was a derisory 40 rubles (\$1.40), and for those assigned to Chechnya 400 rubles (\$14). No commissioned officers were part of the program.

What was slapdash in 2000, when *kontratkniki* were located largely in Chechnya and some had signed up helter-skelter at the front, became systematic under President Putin and Sergei Ivanov, his first defense minister. Following the oft-revised service law of 1998, contract soldiers enlisted for three years and were subsequently eligible for renewable five-year terms; they also sported unique uniforms and insignia and were entitled to an array of benefits. NCOs were offered similar conditions. Putin in 2017 set an all-volunteer force as the final goal, yet without an announced deadline.

Progress was slowed by economics and by the generals' persistent attachment to the draft (with service time down to one year as of 2008), as a means of sustaining the mobilizable reserves they deem necessary to waging and winning a big war. Still, there have been strides in the intended direction. Contract soldiers (ordinary and noncommissioned ranks) are fast becoming the backbone of the army. In 2008 conscripts outnumbered them by 450,000 to 180,000; by 2017 it was the reverse, with 384,000 contract soldiers, 55,000 enlisted warrant officers, and only 276,000 conscripts.¹⁰ Today's *kontratkniki* are bundled into discrete command groups. Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu has directed that two tactical battalions per brigade and regiment are to be staffed by contract troops and placed on permanent readiness; 136 of these battalions are now on the books. One battalion per unit is to consist of conscripts, who will not be in line for combat duty and are typically assigned grunt work such as driver, cook, or sanitation.

"When you enter military service by contract," a Ministry of Defense recruitment blurb declares (Ministerstvo oborony, 2019), "you are choosing stability, wonderful opportunities for self-realization, a decent living standard, and social status." Remuneration, modest by a NATO yardstick, gives the impression of adequacy to the task, and for veteran *kontratkniki* tops the mean monthly wage, currently 45,000 rubles (\$700). Open Defense Ministry sources specify that an NCO platoon leader with twenty years of service would today pull in 69,000 rubles per month, excluding annual and ad hoc bonuses and assorted in-kind benefits (subsidized housing, free food and medical care, etc.). Twenty-five years in harness would carry with it a 40-percent-plus dividend and an enhanced pension. Out-of-homeland work elicits extra prizes. It has been stated on good authority that contract soldiers in the Syrian operation have their pay bumped up by 97,500 rubles, which for the most qualified could result in the equivalent of \$3,000 monthly – quadruple the national average, triple or quadruple the panic level from the second Chechen war, and codified this time around in

¹⁰ Lavrov (2018), p. 3. Commissioned officers had been trimmed to 217,000 in 2017, a 40 percent cut over nine years. See also Bartles (2019).

accessible and legally actionable human-resources handbooks. Officers in Syria pocket up to \$2,000 in supplementary pay, taking them to something like \$5,000 monthly (prizyvnik-soldat.ru, 2016). All ranks also qualify for free insurance against harm to life and limb. A ministerial directive from August 2019 folds housing privileges (mortgages and subsidies) into the mix.

THE GAME CHANGES

All of the foregoing is well and good, and not without interest to external observers and practitioners. But alarm bells about Russian “mercenaries” were not set off in the West by the likes of the scrounging soldiers of fortune and Cossack bands of the 1990s, or their descendants; by the “rowdy men” on six- or twelve-month gigs glimpsed by Gordon in Grozny in 2000; or by the throngs of privates and sergeants on individual contracts at the moment, whose conditions of service closely resemble those of their counterparts in Garrison Petawawa or Fort Bragg. The burning question is about *real* Russian mercenaries – or, if you prefer, one of the alternative labels that can be affixed. These would be commercial organizations that comply with the accepted benchmarks: willingness and ability to use military-grade violence in return, in essence, for personal gain; location outside the classic institutional framework of the Westphalian state; and possession (Hofmann & Schneckener, 2011), of “a certain degree of autonomy with regard to politics, military operations, resources, and infrastructure.”

Here the new Russia has been a latecomer to the game. Private security and detective firms have been legal since 1992. In the early years they often harbored “violent entrepreneurs” with a past in the Soviet special services, and in effect ran protection rackets or “roofs” (*kryshi*) for safety seekers in a time of troubles (Volkov, 1999). They were, though, lightly armed, and have always stuck to domestic affairs. A propos mercenary outfits with a military profile, they sprang up considerably later, although it cannot be ruled out that a sprinkling of them were in existence and flew under the radar for some time. Rooting out more than the names of these organizations is no easy chore. “Because these ... groups are shadowy and protean, it can be challenging to find reliable information about their activities. They are surrounded by rumors, and some of the prominent individuals involved with them have been caught in direct lies” (Marten, 2019b, p. 189).

The earliest enterprise to fit the template, barely, was the Slavonic Corps, registered in Hong Kong by a pair of Russian nationals, Vadim Gusev and Yevgenii Sidorov, in 2013. Like most organizations that followed in its footsteps, it was all tooth and no tail.

Gusev and Sidorov recruited 267 former soldiers with combat seasoning (half of them self-proclaimed Cossacks from the Krasnodar region) for what they were told would be lucrative

guard duty at oil installations and pipelines in civil-war Syria, to be done with the permission of the Assad government and the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB). The paperwork was to be handled by the iffy Moran Security Group, specializing in anti-piracy marine protection and based in St. Petersburg (but registered in Belize, owned by shell companies in Belize and the British Virgin Islands, and with vessels flagged in the Cooks Islands). As it turned out, neither Damascus nor the FSB had green-lighted the group, and it discovered to its chagrin upon arrival in September “that we were sent in as gladiators, under an agreement with some ... local crime lord” near Homs (Korotkov, 2013). The Corps was ordered to take on jihadists and repossess a stock of captured weapons. “The mission fell apart during ... combat, and the Russians fled the warzone” (Miller, 2014). Fortunately, losses from the Keystone Cossacks caper, as one foreign wag dubbed it (Weiss, 2014), were no worse than six wounded.¹¹ Upon their repatriation from Syria, Gusev and Sidorov were arrested by the FSB and thrown into jail.

The ensuing paramilitary contractor to come to light, in 2014–15, was the far more formidable ChVK (the Russian abbreviation for Private Military Company) Wagner, aka the Wagner Group.¹² Wagner was the brainchild of one Dmitrii Utkin, a former *silovik* or officer in a security or military agency, here the special forces of the GRU (military intelligence). Wagner is his nom de guerre, reflecting his supposed fondness for Nazi aesthetics (Richard Wagner was Hitler’s favorite composer); critics sometimes deride the force as “the musicians” (*muzykanty*). ChVK Wagner was the subject of edifying exposés in the St. Petersburg online news service Fontanka.ru by the same investigative journalist, Denis Korotkov, who had scooped the story of the Slavonic Corps in 2003. Its genesis remains wreathed in mystery. There is a murky legal connection to an abstruse security firm, Antiterror-Oryol, grounded from 2003 or 2005 onward (accounts differ on the timing) in a provincial capital southwest of Moscow. The Moran groups (there were eventually two of them) started as offshoots of Antiterror-Oryol, and Utkin found a transitional post in one after exiting the GRU. He participated in the Slavonic Corps, somehow escaping with his reputation intact.

The idea of a Russian Blackwater had been percolating for some time in elite councils. According to insider interviews, senior military men began discussing it in earnest in 2009, influenced by the army’s lackluster effort in the five-day war with Georgia in 2008. In June 2010 the South African ex-general and businessman Eeben Barlow, boss of the Executive Outcomes company which rescued beleaguered African governments between 1989 and 1998, wowed a delegation from the Russian General Staff on the sidelines of the annual St.

¹¹ Significant numbers of Syrians and foreign fighters perished in the battle, but at the hands of government and pro-government forces and not the Russians.

¹² The name is written and pronounced as Vagner in Russian. There is no letter “w” in the Cyrillic alphabet.

Petersburg International Economic Forum (Malkova & Bayev, 2019). “Barlow told the military about the model for the creation of a private military company, and even suggested options for adapting such a model to Russian conditions.” Thought was given at the outset to sending scattered “illegals” on sensitive assignments such as assassination of expat Chechen guerrillas living in exile in the Middle East or Europe. It has been speculated (Malkova & Bayev, 2019) that Valerii Makarov, who took over the General Staff in November 2012, sold a more ambitious approach to Putin, but the timing is out of whack, since the president made a favorable public statement about privatized military firms in April of 2012, as “an instrument in the pursuit of national interests without the direct participation of the state.” By the time Wagner materialized, the political gods were smiling. In 2015 a Wagner training base was set up at Mol’kino, a village in southwestern Russia adjacent to a GRU special forces garrison.

A watershed that same year was the securing of patronage and funding from Yevgenii Prigozhin, the so-called “Putin chef” who had broken into the president’s in-crowd by demonstrating prowess as a caterer of Kremlin banquets. Prigozhin, born in St. Petersburg in 1961, sat nine years in a Soviet prison for a robbery conviction, then got rich in the 1990s in the convenience-store and restaurant businesses. With him at their back, Wagnerites reportedly pull in 250,000 rubles monthly, or about \$4,000 after the 2014–15 decline in the Russian ruble. Prigozhin’s other good turn was to bankroll the Internet Research Agency, the St. Petersburg troll factory which was to be implicated in tampering with the American presidential election of 2016 – largesse that soon landed him on the U.S. Treasury Department’s sanctioned list.¹³

ChVK Wagner’s original deployment of kinetic force abroad was in Ukraine in the spring of 2014, starting in Crimea, where its people were interspersed with the “polite men in green” from Russian special forces, and then in the disputed Donbas section in the southeast, after an anti-Kiev insurrection flared there. Wagner men died in the bloody battle at Debaltseve, in Donetsk province, in January–February 2015; several were awarded Russian presidential medals posthumously. Following Moscow’s decision to intervene in Syria that fall and prop up Bashar al-Assad’s besieged regime, Wagner waded into the imbroglio, with enthusiasm and with blessing in high places. The well-informed Fontanka.ru testified in early 2018 that approximately 3,000 Russians in Wagner’s employ had fought in the Syrian theater since 2015; journalist Liliya Yapparova of the independent Meduza news site believably puts the number at 6,000, with 1,500 or so active at any one time.¹⁴ The Wagner contingent’s cardinal mission was to spearhead the ouster of ISIS from the heritage city Palmyra in 2016,

¹³ On Barlow, Prigozhin, and related topics, see Malkova & Bayev (2019).

¹⁴ On the numbers, see Østensen & Bukkvoll (2018, 26–27).

for which Utkin was issued main battle tanks and rocket launchers. ISIS retook Palmyra at year's end, and the exercise had to be rerun in March 2017.

An impulse for the sea change was emulation of foreign military practice, as the General Staff had been doing on many scores since reform of the armed forces was launched under the auspices of then Defense Minister Anatolii Serdyukov in 2008. Like moving to leaner, nimbler, better-drilled, and better-equipped units, the warming to military contractors was in part (Østensen & Bukkvoll, 2018) “a more or less conscious attempt to imitate ... a clever innovation by the West” (p. 30). Serdyukov, a civilian with an economics diploma who was in the furniture business in St. Petersburg for fifteen years, would have been a natural advocate of privatization. No real progress was made until after his departure under a cloud of corruption allegations in 2012, and the debut of Sergei Shoigu as minister.

A more compelling consideration than imitation of the West was in all likelihood the plausible-deniability variable. It had not sufficed to justify the introduction of mercenaries before 2014. Now, with Russia waging protracted hot wars without precedent since 1991, deniability weighed heavier in the scales.

Vladimir Putin displayed the logic at a press conference this past June when he parried a question about Russian contractors in Syria by claiming that they were making an innocent living, and had nothing to do with government or the defense establishment (President of Russia, 2019):

Look, as for the private companies, including the private security companies under which the people you have mentioned were operating – this is not the Russian state, and they are not engaged in combat. Fortunately or unfortunately, these are issues of an economic nature, related to economic activity, oil production and exploring oilfields – that is what we are talking about here. Of course, we acknowledge that people risk their lives even when addressing these social and economic tasks and problems. Overall, this is also a contribution to fighting terrorism as they are reclaiming these fields from ISIS. But this has nothing to do with the Russian state or the Russian Army, so we do not comment on this.

Putin may well have been thinking of one fierce clash between Wagner commandos, Western-supported units, and the American military – the only known direct exchange of fire between Russians and Americans since the Korean War. It happened at a Wagner initiative in Deir Ezzor province, near the Syrian border with Iraq, in February 2018. During the fracas, U.S. airstrikes left as many as several hundred Russians dead or wounded. Moscow chose to insulate the incident from the fast-fraying relationship with Washington by disclaiming responsibility for the mercenaries. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis let it be

known (Østensen & Bukkvoll, 2018) that “the Russian forces in Syria used the established deconfliction line to convey to U.S. commanders that Wagner in this case was acting outside of their control” (p. 39) – whether or not that was literally true.

Fobbing responsibility onto contractors has had the added appeal of ducking blame for combat casualties, a neuralgic issue in Russia, where memories of the thousands who perished in Afghanistan linger.¹⁵ Polls disclose that most citizens are indifferent to news about losses incurred by the mercenaries, taking the stance that they are well salaried and went into action with their eyes open. In addition, engaging military contractors spares the career military from unsavory work they would rather not dirty their hands with – like (Østensen & Bukkvoll, 2018) “getting rid of local rebel commanders not to the Kremlin’s liking” in the Donbas, no questions asked (p. 43).

The Wagner Group, by all accounts Russia’s most proficient military contractor, is by no means the only one. Regrettably, there is no comprehensive catalogue of the ensemble. Numbers like ten, twenty, ten to twenty, etc., crop up in the hearsay; so do cautionary notes about groups being fly-by-night and, more than once, proving to be figments of the imagination.

A Ukrainian nationalist site four years ago (Gusarov, 2015) enumerated ten Russian private military companies; on the list were the defunct Slavonic Corps; “Antiterror,” a progeny of the aforementioned Antiterror-Oryol, which had long since morphed into other things; “Cossacks” (a social grouping and not a company); and several firms unmentioned anywhere else. Nowadays, besides Wagner the entities most often singled out are the RSB-Group, owned by one Oleg Krinitsyn; E.N.O.T. Corps, designated in its materials as a “military consulting company,” and lately the organizer of youth paramilitary camps; Tiger Top-Rent Security [sic]; Ferax; ChVK MAR, whose slogan is *Reshayem slozhnyye zadachi* (“We fix complicated problems”); Turan, consisting, it is said, of fighters from Central Asia and the North Caucasus; Patriot, an upstart focusing on Africa, with an estimated 1,000 fighters and monthly pay purportedly ranging from 400,000 to 1 million rubles; Shchit, or Shield, mustered in 2018 out of the Kubinka air force base near Moscow; and Vega, and advertised as part of the network of Vegacy Strategic Services Ltd., with head offices in Cyprus and Moscow and representatives in Syria, the U.K., Germany, and Thailand.

Corporate diversification has been tied in with geographic enlargement. The data here, as with everything about military entrepreneurs, are often woefully imprecise and must be handled with caution.

¹⁵ This objective is every so often explained as keeping youthful Russian conscripts out of harm’s way. But to the best of my knowledge the Ministry of Defense has assigned no conscripts to Syria or any other contemporary action theater.

The Jamestown Foundation has published a directory of the “operational zones” of Russian PMCs/irregular forces (Sukhankin, 2019). The time frame extends back into the 1990s (no details provided). For contemporary purposes, the “operational theaters (proven and alleged)” – “alleged” being a problematic category under the best of circumstances – took in four post-Soviet countries (Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine); two in the Balkans (Montenegro, Serbia); five in sub-Saharan Africa (the Central African Republic, Gabon, Mozambique, Somalia, South Sudan); five in the Middle East (Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Sudan, Yemen); two in South Asia (Afghanistan, Sri Lanka); and two in Latin America (Colombia and Venezuela).¹⁶ But for “direct participation in regional conflicts” the Jamestown chart is more parsimonious, fingering only Ukraine, Syria, Libya (“did not carry out military missions”), and then the country clusters of the Balkans and the South Caucasus. Libya should now be classified a confirmed venue, as Russian assistance for militia strongman Khalifa Haftar, first requested in 2015, has been well documented. Prigozhin was spotted at Moscow talks, seated between Haftar and Defense Minister Shoigu, in November 2018. Something like 300 Wagner agents traveled to Libya the summer of 2019. Meduza credibly reports that about thirty (some of them veterans of the Donbas hostilities) were slain on the outskirts of Tripoli, the capital of the fractured state, in September, a loss a Wagner informant termed “a small price to pay for capturing Tripoli” (Yapparova, 2019).

In a contemporaneous bulletin about Yevgenii Prigozhin’s footprint in Africa, Bloomberg News correspondents (Meyer, Arkhipov, & Rahagalala, 2018) professed that he was “active in or moving into ten countries that Russia’s military already has relationships with,”¹⁷ adding Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Madagascar, and Zimbabwe to the Jamestown list while subtracting Gabon, Somalia, and South Sudan. A fascinating tidbit in the Bloomberg piece was the word that Prigozhin has incorporated political consulting into his portfolio; affiliates of his were peddling advice to electoral candidates and governments in Guinea, Madagascar, and Zimbabwe. There is no mention of Wagner vis-à-vis most of these countries, and in most there are no armed operations in progress at the moment.¹⁸

In domestic communiqués and accounts in the state-controlled media (independent mass and social media may take a different tack), Russian military contractors that cross international borders are depicted tersely as trainers, advisers, and security guards. More

¹⁶ In sub-Saharan Africa alone, there is word of intergovernmental agreements initialed over the past two years with Burkina Faso, Burundi, Guinea, Madagascar, and Mali. It is not known how many of these bake in a role for Russian mercenaries.

¹⁷ Open sources put the quantity of such agreements in the low twenties.

¹⁸ Yet another report in mid-2019, based on documents leaked by Wagner affiliates (Harding & Burke, 2019), put Chad, South Africa, and Zambia on the current list and identified Uganda, Equatorial Guinea, Mali, and Uganda as countries where Wagner or other Rogozhin companies planned to work and Ethiopia as a possibility.

complete and candid information would probably pad out Jamestown's and Bloomberg's inventories for direct participation in conflicts.

The informational and moral ecosystem of the "gray zone" between war and peace in strife-bound places tends to blur the boundaries between competing credos, means, and identities, and as often as not to color the whole matrix with skepticism verging on rampant cynicism. So it has come to be with a subset of the capitalist and quasi-capitalist troopers of the Russian Federation.

Consider the lessons of the following vignette (Marten, 2019b):

In December 2017, the Russian Foreign Ministry secured an exemption to a United Nations arms embargo against the embattled CAR [Central African Republic], allowing Moscow to send in weapons and trainers to boost CAR security forces. Russia announced that it was sending in 170 civilian trainers, along with half a dozen regular military officers. A UN panel of experts reported that these instructors were training police in the use of Russian weapons, while also providing security for newly constructed Russian hospitals in the CAR and for the convoys bringing in building materials for those hospitals. Russian personnel were also reported by Russian press sources (with photographic evidence) to be providing personal security for President Faustin-Archange Touadéra and his administration – and by local CAR and French press sources to be providing *security for Prigozhin's mines* (p. 197).

Prigozhin's mines? Here we stumble onto yet another ingredient of Russian military entrepreneurship – the coming to the fore of an ethos that for voracity, impenetrability, and versatility transcends the usual parameters of fee for service.

Superb forensic work by Russian and foreign analysts has revealed that Prigozhin swung a similar deal in Syria before hooking up with the CAR. In December 2016 a company named Evro Polis (owned or controlled by Prigozhin, in a ruling by the U.S. Treasury Department) inked a memorandum of understanding with the Syrian government calling for it to seize and safeguard oil and gas fields, plants, refineries, and other infrastructure previously captured by anti-Assad rebels, with the quid pro quo being full reimbursement of expenses and 25 percent of the fields' output for five years. In other words, Prigozhin, Utkin, and their men were not only to defray costs of the Syrian venture but to turn windfall profits, with no ceiling set. It was this commitment to repossession that led to Wagner's fateful decision to attack a Syrian Kurdish outpost watching over a former ConocoPhillips gas plant in Deir Ezzor in February 2018, thereby precipitating a devastating U.S. counterattack by air.

In the CAR, torn between a Muslim north and a Christian south, the lifeline ran through two more firms with Prigozhin connections, Lobaye Invest and Sewa Security, and via

intermediaries to Evro Polis. The Prigozhin mines in question were concessions for extracting gold and, especially, diamonds, international trade in which is tightly restricted owing to worries about “blood diamonds *New York Times* has chronicled a cascade of events, with the restaurateur Prigozhin in the thick of them (Searcey, 2019). It is worth quoting at length:

The Central African government has welcomed the Russians, betting that stability will enable it to sell more diamonds legally and use the money to rebuild the nation. “The rebellion in our country has cost us a lot,” said Albert Yaloke Mokpeme, the spokesman for the Central African president. “No one came to our aid except the Russian Federation.” ...

But Russia’s help comes at a cost. Its representatives have struck deals with the government to mine diamonds where the trade is legal — one of many signs that Russia’s push into the country is closely tied to the profits it can reap. Russian operatives have even partnered with murderous rebels to obtain diamonds in areas where the trade is outlawed, cashing in on the very lawlessness they have been brought in to end, according to members of the Central African government, Western officials and some of the warlords themselves ...

Mr. Prigozhin has ties to mining, security, and logistics companies that have been set up in the nation since 2017, according to American intelligence officials, Western diplomats and a security analyst who provided registration documents connecting him to some of the businesses. Mr. Prigozhin also personally showed up for peace talks with rebel groups several months ago, according to one warlord present ...

As in the American election, the battle for control over the country is also being fought in the media and on social media. As Russian mercenaries connected to Mr. Prigozhin were streaming into the nation, Facebook sites were popping up with pro-Russian themes, showing photographs of local residents in T-shirts bearing a giant red heart and the slogan “Russia 2018.”

Other soft-power tactics have helped the Russians build, and potentially profit from, deepening ties. Billboards sprouted around the capital, Bangui, with pictures of local soldiers under a Russian flag. A mining company linked to Mr. Prigozhin has built hospitals and slaughterhouses, sponsored a soccer tournament and held a “Miss Centrafrique” beauty contest. It created a Russian-focused radio station, with a broadcast range that reached farther than state radio. It even made a propaganda-style cartoon for children, with a powerful

Russian bear racing through a wintry forest, charging across the globe and coming to the rescue of its embattled friends in the African nation.

The Syrian and Central African Republic tales emphasize contrasting facets of the story in toto. In Syria it has been hard power in synch with an expeditionary force from the uniformed military, bloodbaths, and oil; in the CAR it has been limited displays of force, soft power, the social media, and diamonds. Although local conditions and ever-unfolding state preferences count for a fair amount, certain red threads run throughout: emancipation from the blueprint of strict organizational hierarchy inherited from the Soviet past; improvisation; no great qualms about taking human life; and a psychology of acquisitiveness laced at the margins with nationalism and great-powerism.

THE BOTTOM LINE FOR RUSSIA

Provision of meaningful if unspectacular compensation to its soldiers for the shield they provide, and the hazards they endure, has been normalizing for Russia since the demise of the Soviet Union. Coercive conscription is dying out, volunteer and professional servicemen have arrived to stay – welcome to the twenty-first century.

It is another thing to evaluate the mercenary creatures up-market, militarized but nonmilitary, that Putin's Kremlin and some of its business partners have hatched this past half-decade. They rank far higher in remuneration, exposure to risk, and relevance to politics.

One source of satisfaction is that the process Russians have submitted to can be seen as one of catch-up to what many *other* countries – West and East, democratic and autocratic – have done ever since the 1990s, if not earlier. Russia from this perspective does not come across as an outlier. “By all indications, Russia has been using private military contractors in close cooperation with the military in ways similar to those pioneered by the United States in the early 2000s, particularly during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq” (Gostev & Coalson, 2016). Prince's salute to profitability – “it benefited our bottom line” – would ring true coming out of the mouth of Dmitrii Utkin or Yevgeni Prigozhin. The country's bottom line, too, should be well-served, if American experience is any guide.

As has been noted, however, Russian mercenaries in their current incarnation do deviate from the norm in a series of ways:

- Nonconformity to the U.S. paradigm of conglomerates for whom deadly pursuits are but one line of business among many. Gigantic contractors combining combat with base support, transportation and communications, construction, and the like have not been the Russian way. Stand-alone companies for security and kinetic action set

the mold. Tooth trumps tail in Russia, whereas in the United States it is the other way around.

- Small scale compared to the American giants, a function partly of a late start and partly of truncated range.
- The extreme opacity surrounding Russian firms' origins and inner workings.
- Once set in motion, the abrupt hopping from one organizational formula to the next.
- The incestuous interlocking of private with public actors, so much so that it frequently is unclear who has or aspires to autonomy from whom.
- The crassness of emerging schemes for profit such as in Syria and sub-Saharan Africa. Self-funding and budget balancing shade over into militarized venture capitalism – all under the vigilant gaze of the state.
- The level of insouciance about collateral damage and civilian suffering, which has been known to be reciprocated in attitudes toward the contractors.

The other principal way in which Russia fails to run with the herd is that private military concerns, their recent exploits notwithstanding, are not recognized by law. It is a curious omission. Russia has not laid down legislation in this area and never acceded to the Montreux Document of 2008, although China and fifty-five other countries did. Article 359 of Russia's post-Soviet Criminal Code, adopted in 1996 and untouched since then, expressly forbids "mercenaryism" (*nayomnichestvo*): "Recruitment, training, financing, or any other material provision of a mercenary, and also the use of him in an armed conflict or hostilities, shall be punishable by deprivation of liberty for a term of four to eight years." This was the clause under which the Slavonic Corps' Gusev and Sidorov were prosecuted and sentenced to three years in a labor camp.

Only the year before their downfall, none other than Putin voiced sympathy for legalization of fighters-for-pay – only with zero follow through. Even more puzzling, other individuals complicit in the Slavonic fiasco and with the offshore company that perpetrated it, Moran Security, got off scot-free. Dmitrii Utkin, who within months founded VChK Wagner, was one of the beneficiaries of this laissez-faire. The insinuation was that the letter of the law would be interpreted arbitrarily, presumably through the "telephone law" for which Russia is notorious.

That said, the Criminal Code, passed into law long before, had a loophole for reasons lost in the mists of time. "A mercenary," reads Article 359, "shall be deemed to mean a person who acts for the purpose of getting a material reward, and who is not a citizen of the state in whose armed conflict or hostilities he participates, who does not reside on a permanent basis on its territory, and also who is not a person fulfilling official duties." Since the Russian

Army began warring in Syria on Assad's behalf in September 2015, any outsourcing to contractors since then should be legal in Russian eyes. The Wagner Group satisfied that criterion after September 2015; the hapless Slavonic Corps in its day never did.

The loophole would seem to apply, with a dose of elbow grease, to some markets in Africa. In the Central African Republic, there is spasmodic conflict between ethnic militias on 80 percent of the national territory, and the president in Bangui has appointed a GRU old hand, Valerii Zakharov, as his national security adviser. Further afield in Africa, it is more of a stretch, although communal passions that may erupt in hostilities simmer beneath the surface almost everywhere.

Why not put an end to this legal indeterminacy by simply abolishing or modifying Article 359 and bringing private military companies in from the cold? Why not, like Blackwater in its heyday, just embrace (Prince, 2013) the idea of "a self-contained machine that could recruit, vet, equip, train, deploy, and support all manner of men to accomplish some of the most difficult missions in the world, all for a fraction of what the [Pentagon] typically spent?" (p. 322).

Recall the South African Eeben Barlow's confab with Russian officers in 2010. His counsel about private military firms in Russia clicked with some listeners but for others fell on deaf ears (Malkova & Bayev, 2019). "The main question discussed afterwards was whether such a structure should be legal. Some of the *siloviki* were categorically against it owing to obvious difficulties in controlling the flow of weapons."

Observers since 2014–15 have time after time picked up hints, rumors, and information leaks that all is not sweetness and light between Wagner and elements in the military brass. Nathaniel Reynolds of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace has summarized, drawing on interviews by prying Russian journalists (Reynolds, 2019):

Prigozhin's deals for resources became important to finance Wagner, because his relationship with Russia's defense leadership became strained in the early days of Moscow's intervention in the Syrian war. Prigozhin feuded with ... Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, reportedly over whom Putin should give credit for military successes in Syria and possibly over contracts as well. Amid growing tensions between the two men, the military's deliveries of weapons and supplies to Wagner dried up, as did the lucrative defense contracts that had been flowing to Prigozhin's companies. This was not a complete divorce, however, as the Kremlin's needs demanded some cooperation between the military and Wagner. Operational coordination continued to take place in Syria at a reduced level. Today, Wagner continues to use its covert base near a GRU facility [Mol'kino],

suggesting that it maintains a relationship with Russia's military intelligence in particular.

The calamity at Deir Ezzor deepened the rift (Reynolds, 2019). *Siloviki* grumbled to journalists about the amateurism and recklessness of the operation. Meanwhile, Wagner members (Marten, 2019b) "disputed the military's claim of ignorance [of the firefight] and voiced suspicions that Russian officers let U.S. forces decimate Wagner fighters to embarrass Prigozhin. One former member even claimed that a Russian military officer pledged air cover for the operation, but nothing materialized." The military exhibited "extraordinary callousness" toward the fallen veterans, "including the failure to send in helicopters to remove casualties from the battlefield after the devastating American airstrikes" (p. 195). Disaffection was not limited to the military or FSB. Sources close to the Ministry of Defense told the Russian investigative outlet *The Bell* that when news of the failed attack reached higher-ups, "a deeply embarrassed Prigozhin then had to grovel to Kremlin officials that such an error would not happen again" Hauer (2019).

None of this infighting would have mattered if Vladimir Putin, as master of ceremonies, had come down once and for all for or against the legalization he had hinted at as desirable in 2012. If for legalization, this would have entailed a date certain to achieve it and regularization of the relationship with the military command. Legislation about a new legal framework for mercenary work has repeatedly been introduced into Russia's parliament, only to languish in committee or be withdrawn for further consideration. That Putin has refrained from moving forward, and that Wagner has shrugged off defeats to find new fields to conquer,¹⁹ insinuates that he finds the fuzzy status quo to be in his political interest.

In Putin's Russia, that is enough to lock an arrangement into place, until the next time.

¹⁹Hauer (2019) not long after Deir Ezzor spoke of Wagner as "a shell of its former self" and doomed to extinction. But in the blink of an eye it and Prigozhin had papered over differences with their detractors and were opening up markets in Africa.

REFERENCES

- Ahram, A. (2011). *Proxy warriors: the rise and fall of state-sponsored militias*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- President of Russia (2019). Answers to journalists' questions following Direct Line. June 20. Retrieved from <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/60797>.
- Arduino, A. (2018). *China's private army: protecting the new silk road*. London: Palgrave Pivot.
- Avant, D. (2005). *The market for force: the consequences of privatizing security*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bartles, C. (2019). *History and roles of enlisted professionals in the Russian Armed Forces*. Fort Leavenworth: Army University Press. Retrieved from <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/Archives/2019/March/Russian-NCOs/>.
- Dunigan, M. (2011). *Victory for hire: private security companies' impact on military effectiveness*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Dunigan, M., & U. Petersohn (eds.) (2015). *The markets for force: privatization of security across world regions*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Goltz, T. (1993). Letter from Eurasia: the hidden Russian hand. *Foreign Policy* 92, pp. 92–116.
- Gordon, M. (2000). The grunts of Grozny. *New York Times Magazine*, February 27, 2000. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/02/27/magazine/the-grunts-of-grozny.html>.
- Gostev, A., & R. Coalson (2016). Russia's paramilitary mercenaries emerge from the shadows. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, December 17. Retrieved from <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-paramilitary-mercenaries-emerge-from-the-shadows-syria-ukraine/28180321.html>.
- Gusarov, V. (2015). Russian private military companies as licensed tool of terror. InformNapalm, November. Retrieved from <https://informnapalm.org/en/russian-private-military-companies-as-licensed-tool-of-terror/>.
- Harding, L., & J. Burke (2019). Leaked documents reveal Russian effort to exert influence in Africa. *The Guardian*, June 11. Retrieved from

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/11/leaked-documents-reveal-russian-effort-to-exert-influence-in-africa>.

Hauer, N. (2019). The rise and fall of a Russian mercenary army. *Foreign Policy*, October. Retrieved from <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/06/rise-fall-russian-private-army-wagner-syrian-civil-war/>.

Hofmann, C., & U. Schneekener (2011). Engaging non-state armed actors in state- and peace-building: options and strategies. *International review of the Red Cross* 93, pp. 1–19.

Innes, M., ed. (2012). *Making sense of proxy wars: states, surrogates & the use of force*. Dulles: Potomac.

Isenberg, D. (2009). *Shadow force: private security contractors in Iraq*. Westport: Praeger Security.

Korotkov, D. (2013). Poslednii boi “Slavyanskogo korpusa” (The last stand of the Slavic Corps). Fontanka.ru, November 14. Retrieved from <https://www.fontanka.ru/2013/11/14/060/>.

Lavrov, A. (2018). *Russian military reforms from Georgia to Syria*. Washington: Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Malkova, I., & A. Bayev (2019). Chastnaya armiya dlya prezidenta: istoriya samogo delikatnogo porucheniya Yevgeniya Prigozhina (A private army for the president: the story of Yevgenii Prigozhin’s most delicate assignment). *The Bell*, January 29. Retrieved from <https://thebell.io/41889-2/>. English translation available at <https://thebell.io/en/a-private-army-for-the-president-the-tale-of-evgeny-prigozhin-s-most-delicate-mission/>.

Marten, K. (2019a). *Into Africa: Prigozhin, Wagner, and the Russian military*. PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 561.

Marten, K. (2019b). Russia’s use of semi-state security forces: the case of the Wagner Group.” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 35, pp. 181–204.

McFate, S. (2014). *The modern mercenary: private armies and what they mean for world order*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Meyer, H., I. Arkhipov, & A. Rahagalala (2018). Putin's notorious “chef” is now meddling across Africa. *BNN Bloomberg Politics*, November 20. Retrieved from <https://www.bnnbloomberg.ca/putin-s-chef-is-now-meddling-across-africa-1.1170783>.

Miller, J. (2014). The insane story of Russian mercenaries fighting for the Syrian regime. *Huffington Post*, January 25. Retrieved from https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-insane-story-of-russi_b_4317729.

- Ministerstvo oborony Rossiiskoi Federatsii (Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation) (2019). Sluzhba po kontraktu (Service under contract). Retrieved from https://recrut.mil.ru/career/soldiering/social_guarantees.htm.
- Montreux Document (2008). *The Montreux Document on pertinent international legal obligations and good practices for states related to operations of private military and security companies during armed conflict*. Berne: Federal Department of Foreign Affairs.
- Mumford, A. (2013). *Proxy warfare*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Overton, I., E. Benevilli, & L. Bruun (2018). Britain is the world centre for private military contractors – and it’s almost impossible to find out what they’re up to. *Open Democracy*, December 20. Retrieved from <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/britain-is-world-centre-for-private-military-contractors/>.
- Percy, S. (2007). *Mercenaries: the history of a norm in international relations*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Prince, E. (2013). *Civilian warriors: the inside story of Blackwater and the unsung heroes of the war on terror*. New York: Portfolio/Penguin.
- Private Security Monitor (<http://psm.du.edu/index.html>). Site maintained by Sié Chéou-Kang Center for International Security & Diplomacy, University of Denver.
- prizyvnik-soldat.ru (2016). Skol’ko platyat kontraktnikom v Sirii? (How much are *kontratniki* paid in Syria?). Retrieved from <https://prizyvnik-soldat.ru/skolko-poluchayut-kontraktniki-v-sirii/>.
- Rabin, A. (2019). Diplomacy and dividends: who really controls the Wagner Group? October. Washington: Foreign Policy Research Institute. Retrieved from <https://www.fpri.org/article/2019/10/diplomacy-and-dividends-who-really-controls-the-wagner-group/>.
- Reynolds, N. (2019). Putin’s not-so-secret mercenaries: patronage, geopolitics, and the Wagner Group. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July. Retrieved from <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/07/08/putin-s-not-so-secret-mercenaries-patronage-geopolitics-and-wagner-group-pub-79442>.
- Schwartz, M., J. Sargent, & C. Mann (2018). *Defense acquisitions: how and where DOD spends its contracting dollars*. Washington: Congressional Research Service.
- Searcey, D. (2019). Gems, warlords and mercenaries: Russia’s playbook in Central African Republic. *New York Times*, September 30. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/30/world/russia-diamonds-africa-prigozhin.html>.

- Singer, P. (2003). *Corporate warriors: the rise of the privatized military industry*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.
- Spearin, C. (2018). NATO, Russia, and private military and security companies. *The RUSI Journal* 163, pp. 66–72.
- Stanger A. (2009). *One nation under contract: the outsourcing of American power and the future of foreign policy*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Sukhankin, S. (2019). War, business, and Ideology: how Russian private military contractors pursue Moscow’s interests. Washington: Jamestown Foundation, March. Retrieved at <https://jamestown.org/program/war-business-and-ideology-how-russian-private-military-contractors-pursue-moscows-interests/>.
- “Top 8 international private contractor companies in the world” (2015). *Special Ops Magazine*, June 25. Retrieved from <https://special-ops.org/12740/top-8-international-private-contractor-companies-world/>.
- U.S. Army (2019). “Careers and jobs” blurb. Retrieved from <https://www.goarmy.com/careers-and-jobs/help-choosing-a-career-job.html>.
- Volkov, V. (1999). Violent entrepreneurship in post-communist Russia. *Europe-Asia Studies* 51, pp. 741–54.
- Weiss, M. (2013). The case of the Keystone Cossacks. *Foreign Policy*, November 21. Retrieved from <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/11/21/the-case-of-the-keystone-cossacks/>.
- Yapparova, L. (2019). A small price to pay for Tripoli. *Meduza*, October 2. Retrieved from <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2019/10/02/a-small-price-to-pay-for-tripoli>.
- Østensen, Å., & T. Bukkvoll (2018). *Russian use of private military and security companies – the implications for European and Norwegian security*. Oslo: Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI).