

# Russian Commercial Warriors on the Battlefield

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## Abstract

Since the war in Ukraine started in February 2022, the Wagner group has become the personification of evil. ‘Mercenaries’ or ‘soldiers of fortune’ as they have been called still leads to misunderstanding and disapproval in the Western world. But denying the existence of so-called soldiers of fortune is denying the past, present and the future of warfare. This chapter argues that the line between mercenarism and Private Military and Security Companies (PMSCs) is very thin, due to a lack or the absence of clear definitions and a lack of legal clarity. On the one hand, proponents of outsourcing certain security tasks claim that PMSCs can make a positive contribution to peace and stability in contested areas around the world when governments are unwilling or unable to provide public security. On the other, opponents point out the negative aspects of this, and with it the loss of control over the monopoly on force. Perhaps this negative connotation of PMSCs is an exaggeration of the so-called moral conscience prevailing in Western countries and based purely on excesses and failures. However, Wagner’s performance in Ukraine does not meet the standards of today’s Western PMSC business. This chapter is based on Western publications which are publicly available.

**Keywords:** PMSC, mercenary, Wagner, Redut, Ukraine, Russia-Ukraine war

## 1. Introduction

A book on the Russian-Ukrainian war that began in February 2022 cannot be published without explaining Private Military and Security Companies (PMSCs). After all, it was during this war that the name of the Wagner Group became well-known, and people started to realise how PMSCs’ impact on the battlefield was steadily growing. For months, various mainstream and social media reported about the actions of this PMSC and its financier Yevgeny Prigozhin. The Wagner Group fought for nearly a year to capture the Ukrainian city of Bakhmut, metre by metre, and suffering many casualties.

Through this bitter struggle, the Wagner Group became the symbol for the market of force, which up to then had tried to prevent too much public attention. There are other PMSCs fighting on the Russian side during this Russia-Ukraine war.

In this chapter, in addition to the Wagner Group, the lesser-known PMSC *Redut* is also discussed. For now, the question arises: Can companies like Wagner and Redut be considered cold-blooded mercenary armies, or are they behaving in the manner of modern PMSCs? Further research on this topic may provide new and clearer insights. Therefore, the purpose of this chapter is to find an answer to the following research question: ‘Do Wagner and Redut’s combat operations in the Russia-Ukraine conflict conform to views on modern Private Military and Security Companies?’

The answer to this question will shed more light on the role of this market for force on which various PMSCs operate. The structure of this chapter is as follows. The first two sections provide a better understanding of the difference between mercenaries and PMSCs, including a consideration of the legal bases of both, followed by a section on the different types of PMSCs. The next section answers the question why PMSCs fight in armed conflicts. Subsequently, PMSC Wagner and its involvement in the Russia-Ukraine conflict is discussed, with a look at another Russian PMSC, Redut, as well. It will put both PMSCs to the test, how they fit in with the views on modern PMSCs and to find out the differences and similarities of the two Russian-oriented PMSCs. The conclusion answers the research question. The final remarks argue what these insights about PMSCs mean for the future of warfare. Although PMSCs operate in more theatres of operations around the globe, this chapter exclusively focuses on the Russia-Ukraine war.

## 2. Mercenaries and PMSCs explained

There is still much ambiguity about what exactly should be understood by mercenaries and PMSCs. Often the terms ‘mercenaries’ and ‘PMSCs’ are used interchangeably, and no distinction is made between them, while on the other hand several experts believe that a difference can be made between the two. This section first discusses the international legal foundations regarding mercenaries and PMSCs. Then, the next section discusses the differences and similarities between mercenaries and PMSCs.

According to *Oxford Languages* the term mercenary means ‘a professional soldier hired to serve in a foreign army.’ The term originates from the Latin word *mercenarius* meaning ‘hireling,’ which in turn stems from the word *merces* meaning ‘reward.’ Although there is no unanimous academic agreement on the term mercenary, the explanation provided by the 1949 *Geneva Conventions* is often followed. According to article 47, sub 2, a mercenary is any person who:

1. Is specially recruited locally or abroad in order to fight in an armed conflict;
2. Does, in fact, take a direct part in the hostilities;

3. Is motivated to take part in the hostilities essentially by the desire for private gain and, in fact, is promised, by or on behalf of a party to the conflict, material compensation substantially in excess of that promised or paid to combatants of similar ranks and functions in the armed forces of that party;
4. Is neither a national of a party to the conflict nor a resident of territory controlled by a party to the conflict;
5. Is not a member of the armed forces of a party involved in the conflict;
6. Has not been sent by a state, which is not a party to the conflict, on official duty as a member of its armed forces.<sup>1</sup>

Although the Geneva Conventions had already defined mercenaries and mercenarism in 1949, an official ban on the use of it was never issued until 1989, when the United Nations, through its *Office of High Commissioner for Human Rights* (OHCHR), adopted *Resolution 44/34*, which comprises the 'International Convention against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries.' Colonial powers made elaborate use of mercenaries to fight opposing forces and these forces were often treated as combatants. In the 20th century, with their struggle for independence, the emerging states in Africa developed a dislike for mercenarism as it was directly linked to colonialism, racism, and the denial of self-determination. Only in 1977, the African Union adopted a 'Unity Convention for the Elimination of Mercenarism in Africa' in Libreville, the capital of Gabon.<sup>2</sup> This convention entered into force in 1985 and has so far been ratified by 32 out of 55 African countries.<sup>3</sup> After the entry into force of the 'International Convention against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries' in 2001, 37 countries ratified the convention. It is notable that the United States, United Kingdom, and the Russian Federation, who actively use PMSCs as a complement to their large standing armies, did not ratify this resolution and have not done so far.<sup>4</sup>

When the Angolan government in 1995 succeeded in enlisting the South African-based commercial company *Executive Outcomes* for combat services, academics struggled to categorise this company. On the one hand, *Executive Outcomes* participated in fighting activities during the Angolan Civil War to make a profit for itself, as was customary with mercenaries; on the other, *Executive Outcomes* was a legally registered company and subject to business regulations. Initially, organised mercenaries were grouped according to their business structure, legal

<sup>1</sup> "Doctors without borders: The practical guide to Humanitarian Law."

<sup>2</sup> African Union, "Convention for the elimination of mercenarism in Africa."

<sup>3</sup> United Nations, "International convention against the recruitment, use, financing and training of mercenaries."

<sup>4</sup> Tekingunduz, "Are Private Military Contractors any different from mercenaries?"

form, clients, services, and frontline distance. Later, the term PMSC appeared with the general assumption that most of these companies work for a diverse group of clients, perform a multitude of functions, and adapt their services in response to changing client demands and business opportunities.<sup>5</sup> Today, the International Committee of the Red Cross, internationally recognised as a legal authority on armed conflicts, assumes that 'PMSCs' are private business entities that provide military and/or security services, regardless of how they describe themselves.<sup>6</sup> Their functions include armed surveillance and protection of persons and objects, such as convoys, buildings and other places; maintenance and operation of weapons systems; detention of prisoners; and advice to or training of local armed forces and security personnel.<sup>7</sup>

With the continued commercialisation of the battlefield, a Swiss initiative, the *Montreux Document*, specifically pursuing PMSCs saw the light of day in 2008. It provides a blueprint for governments to effectively regulate PMSCs. The document highlights the responsibilities of three principal types of states: 1. 'Contracting states,' being nations that hire PMSCs, 2. 'Territorial states,' being nations on whose territory PMSCs operate, and 3. 'Home states,' being nations in which PMSCs are headquartered or registered.<sup>8</sup> The recognition of three different types of states contributes to a clearer view on who is doing what, where and with what responsibility. The convention is currently backed by more than 50 countries (governments) worldwide, including the United States and the United Kingdom.

Following the Montreux Document, another Swiss initiative started in 2013: the *International Code of Conduct Association*, known by its acronym ICoCA. This multi-stakeholder organisation serves as guardian and regulator of the 'International Code of Conduct for Private Security Service Providers,' also known as the *Code*.<sup>9</sup> The aim of this initiative is for affiliates to respect human rights and International Humanitarian Law during their activities. The initiative is intended as an international code of conduct for Private Security Companies (PSCs), whose focus is the protection of high-ranking individuals, infrastructure, transportation and actions of large corporations and multinationals and governments. It should be noted, however, that the dividing line between PMSCs and PSCs is sometimes blurred, as some nations have started using PSCs to allow them to perform various military tasks in addition to their protective duties. The ICoCA invests in activities ranging from capacity building,

<sup>5</sup> Krahmann, 'Privatization of Warfare.'

<sup>6</sup> Montreux Document Forum, "The Montreux Document on Private Military and Security Companies," 9.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Idem., section 2.

<sup>9</sup> ICoCA – International Code of Conduct Association, "About us," 3-6.

certification to advisory services, monitoring, and the handling of complaints, to provide affiliates, who comply with this, with a distinctive seal of approval.<sup>10</sup>

Currently, the ICoCA initiative counts 264 participants worldwide. Participants can be divided by membership type including PSCs who are either certified members or affiliate non-voting members, international organisations from civil society, such as *Human Rights Watch*, governments<sup>11</sup> and observer organisations.<sup>12</sup> The 'Code' is intended for PSCs and their providers, whereby PSCs are defined as 'any company whose business activities include the provision of so-called 'security services,' either on its own behalf or on behalf of another, irrespective of how such company describes itself.'<sup>13</sup> According to the Code, the undertakings of security services include mainly activities in the field of guarding, protection, surveillance, and training.<sup>14</sup> The Code does not specifically cover involvement in combat operations, which excludes many PMSCs, at least those who focus purely on participation in combat activities. It does limit the scope of the Code. Since the introduction of the document, independent research showed a strong decrease of violence against civilians during and after the end of hostilities, from which the forum concludes that the introduction of the Montreux Document has a positive impact on the reduction of violence against civilians.<sup>15</sup> Despite existing mercenary legislation, the previously observed blurring of boundaries between PSCs and PMSCs makes it extremely difficult to prevent violations of these rules and conventions by mercenaries, PSCs and/or PMSCs.<sup>16</sup>

### 3. PMSCs versus mercenaries

When Erik Prince, a former US Navy Seal, founded US-based *Blackwater* in the late 1990s, he could not foresee that his company would be worth billions of dollars only 10 years later.<sup>17</sup> With *Blackwater*, as with South-African-based *Executive Outcomes* a decade earlier, the veil of secrecy and obscurity around mercenarism was partially

<sup>10</sup> ICoCA – International Code of Conduct Association, "What we do."

<sup>11</sup> Today, only the governments of Australia, Canada, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom, and the United States are committed.

<sup>12</sup> ICoCA – International Code of Conduct Association, "Members archive."

<sup>13</sup> ICoCA – International Code of Conduct Association, "The code."

<sup>14</sup> ICoCA – International Code of Conduct Association, "The code."

<sup>15</sup> 'Montreux Document Forum, "Independent Research confirms the positive impact of the Montreux Document on the reduction of PMSC's violence against civilians."

<sup>16</sup> For more background information on the military oath, loyalty and professionalism in relation to PMSCs see: Wagemaker and Chafekar with their chapter "A military oath for Russian military security contractors? Wagner, Putin and the death of Prigozhin" in this book.

<sup>17</sup> Simons, *Master of War: Blackwater USA's Erik Prince and the Business of War*, 200.

lifted and the market for force became publicly widely known. Earlier, Tim Spicer, founding father of British-based *Sandline International* had already coined the term Private Military Company (PMC) to distance himself from the tainted term of mercenary.<sup>18</sup> The term PMC, which was commonly used at first, was later expanded to the term PMSC.

Researchers and international organisations initially viewed PMSCs and mercenaries as similar actors. For example, in 2007, the United Nations General Assembly still considered PMSCs as ‘new mercenary modalities,’ noting that while PMSCs had a sound corporate organisational structure with long-term business interests, they were essentially no different from mercenaries. Later, research focused on identifying clear differences between PMSCs and mercenaries on the one hand and regular soldiers on the other, noting that ‘mercenaries are combatants without close and immediate control by a legitimate authority.’<sup>19</sup>

Nowadays, a difference has indeed been identified in the academic debate about mercenaries and PMSCs. The crucial difference between PMSCs and ad hoc mercenaries is that PMSC contractors, because of the obvious way in which they are organised and hired by governments, often ensure that they use less force and operate in a restrained manner, subject to applicable rules and values within the international community. In contrast, ad hoc mercenaries are considered not very integrated into the security system, as they act mainly in individual form, making them less approachable and susceptible to the control of the authorities that hire them. It may make them more likely to use excessive force and to violate human rights.<sup>20</sup>

Another major difference is the already mentioned ban on mercenaries since UN resolution 44/34 was invoked, whereas PMSCs have not been banned. Since security companies work together with governments and their armed forces in the service of their countries’ interests they are considered ‘legal.’<sup>21</sup> These PMSCs act as an intermediary between the professional soldier and the governments that hire them; at the same time, mercenaries can be hired by anyone with sufficient funds.

Besides the differences between mercenaries and PMSC-contractors, there are similarities between mercenaries and PMSC-contractors, which blur the lines between who is who. First and foremost, both PMSC contractors and mercenaries work for money and predominantly not for idealistic or political motives. Second, more in general, a mercenary is deployed for frontline operations while

<sup>18</sup> Leander, “The Market for force and public security: the destabilizing consequences of Private Military Companies.”

<sup>19</sup> Mquirmi, *Private Military and Security Companies: A New Form of Mercenarism?* 3.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Fernández, “Mercenaries: the bloodthirsty side of the war.”

PMSC-contractors can serve in multiple areas of operation: intelligence, security, logistic, transportation and in combat.<sup>22</sup>

#### 4. Different types of PMSCs

Modern military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan have dramatically changed the way war is perceived. Central to this transformation has been a huge increase in the number of commercial companies contributing to military operations. These companies not only provide for logistics and transport but also for training and assistance, intelligence, security and even combat operations. While there were six times as many United States (US) soldiers as contractors in the area of operations during the Vietnam War, the ratio has dropped to 1.4:1 in Afghanistan and even 1:1 in Iraq.<sup>23</sup> The ratios show that the influence of contractors, and hence PMSCs, on the battlefield has increased enormously over the last 50 years. It is therefore imperative to further analyse PMSCs. Although well-known PMSC-researcher Peter W. Singer denounced the lack of a proper typology for PMSCs, he structured PMSCs into three different types, based on tasks, purpose and the distance to the frontline:

1. **Type 1, Military Provider Firms:** These firms send in soldiers who participate in the actual fighting (combat-protection) or provide the client with commanders who direct the local troops, e.g., the South African-based *Executive Outcomes*, US-based *Academi*, which was formerly known as *Blackwater*, and Canadian-based *GardaWorld Corporation* (including former British-based *Aegis Defence Services*).
2. **Type 2, Military Consultant Firms:** These firms provide services to their client in the field of military advice and training, which are inherent for the execution of military operations, e.g., US-based *MPRI (Military Professional Resources Incorporated)*, or the Netherlands-based *Triangular Group Academy*.
3. **Type 3, Military Support Firms:** This last type of PMSC provides its client with services in the field of logistics, transportation, and operational capabilities, e.g., US-based *Kellogg, Brown and Root*, US-based *Supreme Group* and Spanish-based *Golden Owl*, which specialises in providing international open-source intelligence and investigation.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Schwartz and Swain, *Department of Defense Contractors in Iraq and Afghanistan: Background and Analysis*, 5; Krahmann, "Privatization of warfare," 121.

<sup>24</sup> Singer, *Corporate Warriors: The Rise of the Privatized Military Industry*, 91.

The evolution of PMSCs has not come to an end yet. As wars never stop evolving and changing their lethal character neither will militaries and actors closely affiliated to war. 'The PMSCs of today are flexible entities that respond to customer demand.'<sup>25</sup> As long as wars endure, there will be mercenaries, PMSCs or whatever they are termed in future... and they will wander battlefields for eternity!

## 5. Reasons to use military provider firms

Looking at the three different types of PMSC, it is evident that type 2 and 3 PMSCs not only carry out their activities further from the front line but are also more bound by international regulations. This is much less true for type 1 PMSCs, and yet nations make elaborate use of this type of PMSC. There are five main reasons why nations or non-state actors advocate the deployment of PMSCs for combat operations in armed conflicts, although the participation of independent, commercial parties in fighting can have far-reaching implications for the international situation. Applying these reasons on the PMSCs under survey will provide a better understanding of how these PMSCs operate.

First, and most obvious, PMSCs are flexible and can move quickly to a potential global hot spot, without the long political and bureaucratic decision-making process armed forces need to adhere to. As with the short notice to deploy troops, a possible exit or repatriation from a conflict area is also easy and can take place directly after the task is completed, there is no obligation to meet a certain end state before departure. This makes PMSCs attractive to nations or other relevant parties involved in armed conflict.<sup>26</sup>

Secondly, it is not always clear who is actually deploying the PMSCs. Consequently, top officials invoke plausible deniability and avoid any responsibility.<sup>27</sup> Authorities in a nation sometimes deliberately want to put a veil of ambiguity over a conflict. They allow one or several PMSCs to fight along regular army units or perform 'dirty' tasks on the battlefield through all sorts of fuzzy international constructions. Moreover, it is doubtful that a PMSC, in turn, would ever allow its contractors to be tried by the legal system of a weak client state, even if legal action were taken from the global community.<sup>28</sup> In addition, if many contractors from a PMSC are killed, a

<sup>25</sup> Nimkar, "From Bosnia to Baghdad: the case for regulating Private Military and Security Companies," 7.

<sup>26</sup> Raman and Opre, "Private Military Companies: Empowerment of state of privates?"

<sup>27</sup> Palka, *The Awakening of Private Military Companies*, 9.

<sup>28</sup> Singer, "Corporate warriors: the rise of the privatized military industry and its ramifications for international security," 215.

nation need not be blamed. While governments are held accountable for the deaths and injuries of their soldiers, PMSCs do not have to publicly report their casualty numbers.<sup>29</sup> In other words, PMSCs allow nations to shirk responsibilities and to deny any involvement in certain activities at the frontline, while making it difficult internationally to prosecute and try these PMSCs and their contractors if necessary.

Third, in general, PMSC employees are well-trained professionals. They are often recruited from the 'elite forces of the best-trained armies in the world.'<sup>30</sup> A 2014 study found that PMSC operators possess many military and special forces skills, can perform a variety of missions and can quickly adapt to the demands of the military mission on the ground in the deployment area.<sup>31</sup> PMSCs are therefore a welcome addition to combat power for many armed forces, which no longer possess these capacities themselves due to the many budget cuts in recent years. These PMSCs therefore can be used as a force multiplier in conflicts when these governments cannot tip the balance in their favour, or in conflicts where governments are, or the international community is, unable or unwilling to deploy forces, like in Angola and Sierra Leone.<sup>32</sup>

The fourth reason for a nation to deploy PMSCs in armed conflict has a direct link to the previous reason: it can be a low-cost solution. How much nations are willing to pay for PMSC services cannot be ascertained from public sources, but the activities of a PMSC are based on a business model. Information on the cost-effectiveness of PMSCs is also inconclusive, but it is often claimed that PMSCs are more cost-effective than standing armies. Governments that hire PMSCs do not have to take care of remittances for the purpose of pensions, health care, housing benefits, etc.<sup>33</sup>

The fifth and final reason why nations are willing to deploy nations for war-fighting is because these nations believe that the PMSCs, whom they would like to use for those combat operations, are committed to a high professional standard with ethical and human values. In this way, PMSCs earn respect and trust even though their operators have not taken an oath, as soldiers of regular armed forces do.<sup>34</sup> PMSCs are not seen as individual mercenaries, but as companies in a free market environment. Proponents of PMSCs say they are respected companies with highly qualified staff, many of whom have military backgrounds. In her 2005 article, Leander explains that PMSCs must behave respectfully to survive in the

<sup>29</sup> Dijkman, *Soldiers of Fortune: The Wagner Group As a Tool for Russian Grand Strategy*, 34.

<sup>30</sup> Zadzorova, "Privat Military Companies: an efficient way of meeting the demand for security."

<sup>31</sup> Joachim and Schneiker, "All for one and one in all: Private military security companies as soldiers, business managers and humanitarians."

<sup>32</sup> Leander, "The market for force and public security."

<sup>33</sup> DCAF Backgrounder, "Private Military Companies," 2.

<sup>34</sup> For more background information on the military oath, loyalty and professionalism in relation to PMSCs see: Wagemaker and Chafekar in this book.

market of force. Therefore, a high degree of professionalism is required to show such behaviour. According to Leander, PMSCs do not behave like Machiavelli's 'whores of war' and are not traditional mercenaries.<sup>35</sup> PMCS that do not meet the standards of professionalism will eventually force themselves out of business.<sup>36</sup>

## 6. Wagner's role in Ukraine

The following sections focus on Russian PMSCs involved in the war in Ukraine, starting with the Wagner Group or *ChVK Vagner*<sup>37</sup> in Russian. The origin of the Wagner Group is not clear. According to the independent Russian website *The Bell*, the creation of the Wagner Group derives from an initiative by some senior Russian officers after they attended an impressive presentation by Eeben Barlow, founder of South African-based *Executive Outcomes*. The officers decided that the leadership would be in the hands of Yevgeny Prigozhin, Putin's 'chef.' Wagner Group's main training camp is at the *Molkino* base in Russia's Krasnodor region, which is also home to the 10 *Spetsnaz* Brigade, belonging to the GRu,<sup>38</sup> Russia's military intelligence service.<sup>39</sup> This assumes an intimate relationship between the Wagner Group and the GRu, although it has never been openly confirmed by Russian authorities. On top of this, Wagner is equipped by the Russian government and uses Russian armed forces logistics to be able to execute military operations.<sup>40</sup> This raises the question of whether the Wagner Group can be considered a PMSC operating on the bases of a so called free market for force instead of being an extension of Moscow's political power. The Wagner Group, however, likes to remain shrouded in mystery, with little or no traceability.

After its founding, the Wagner Group soon became active during the annexation of Crimea, and later during the armed conflict in the Donbas region.<sup>41</sup> Wagner's mission, often done at the invitation of the authorities, involves protecting high-ranking individuals, maintaining order, supporting groups involved in internal conflicts, but in Africa they also provide protection for gold and diamond

<sup>35</sup> Leander, "The market for force and public security."

<sup>36</sup> Mquirimi, *Private Military and Security Companies: A New Form of Mercenarism?*

<sup>37</sup> *ChVK* in *ChVK Vagner* stands for *Chastnyye Voyennyye Kompanii*, which means Private Military Company (the old terminology).

<sup>38</sup> *GRu* stands for *Glavnoye upravleniye General'nogo shtaba Vooruzhonnykh sil Rossiyskoy Federatsii* (Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation), Russia's military security service.

<sup>39</sup> Fainberg, *Russian spetsnaz, Contractors and Volunteers in the Syrian Conflict*, 18.

<sup>40</sup> The Economic Times, "Nepali Gurkhas are joining Wagner: The lure of the Private Military Companies."

<sup>41</sup> Wouters, *Putin's Private Army: How the Wagner Group Supports Russian Strategy*, 3-4.

mining.<sup>42</sup> The Wagner Group therefore seems not only to be a type 1 PMSC, as appears in Ukraine and Syria, but in Africa and elsewhere it is also a type 2 PMSC. From its creation, it was noticeable that the Wagner Group did not comply with international regulations. Assumed incidents of Wagner operators or Wagner-affiliates, such as looting, plunder and rape in the town of Bucha at the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine conflict or the execution of Wagner-deserters, show that Wagner has not adhered to human rights and international law.<sup>43</sup>

In the summer of 2022, a hugely bitter fight between Wagner and Ukrainian forces unfolded over Bakhmut, while experts disputed its strategic value. Bakhmut became an object of prestige for both the Russian Federation and Ukraine. On the one hand, President Putin wanted to capture the city of Bakhmut at all costs because the Russian front had stalled after a few months, and the seizure of Bakhmut was still the only success on the Russian side.<sup>44</sup> On the other, President Zelensky and the Ukrainian military authorities saw the defence of Bakhmut as an opportunity to considerably weaken the Russian forces.<sup>45</sup>

During the first half of 2023, the Wagner Group became completely exhausted after months of fierce fighting. Prigozhin proclaimed several times that Bakhmut was completely in Wagner's hands, but each time Ukrainian defenders managed to regain small parts of the city.<sup>46</sup> In late May, President Zelensky hinted at its final fall.<sup>47</sup> Whether the Wagner Group adhered to professional standards, as mentioned as the fifth reason for the use of type 1 PMSCs, is doubtful, as they fought brutally for months in and around the city of Bakhmut. Should the Russian authorities have found this objectionable at all, it was overshadowed by the fact that during the autumn of 2022, and the first half of 2023, the Wagner Group was the only unit still making slow progress on the Russian front.

During the battle for Bakhmut, it was Prigozhin's army who was able to fill up the ranks faster with replacements than the Russian armed forces could do with a centralised mobilisation system. This flexibility, being the first reason to use military provider firms, came at a high price. As it was not until Wagner's forces were exhausted that they were finally replaced by regular Russian forces at the end of May 2023.<sup>48</sup> Although the quality and the training of these replacements can be questioned it shows the flexibility of this auxiliary force.

<sup>42</sup> Clarke, Parens, Faulkner, and Wolf, "Is Wagner pivoting back to Africa?"

<sup>43</sup> McFate, "Opinion | The mercenaries behind the Bucha Massacre"; Faulconbridge, "Video shows sledgehammer execution of Russian mercenary."

<sup>44</sup> Engelbrecht, "What does Russia's success in Bakhmut mean for the war in Ukraine?"

<sup>45</sup> Dettmer and Melkozerova, "Zelensky digs in against calls to quit Bakhmut."

<sup>46</sup> d'Istria, "Wagner and Putin claim the capture of Bakhmut, a city reduced to rubble."

<sup>47</sup> Viser, Pager and Hee Lee, "Zelensky says destroyed Bakhmut now lives 'only in our hearts.'"

<sup>48</sup> Stepanenko, Bailey, Mappes, Wolkov, and Kagan, "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 28, 2023."

The loss of lives of Wagner's troops in the conflict has been estimated at over 20,000, according to Telegram's 'Wagner Loading' channel around July 20th 2023.<sup>49</sup> These numbers, however, cannot be confirmed and are in contrast with the numbers given by the Russian authorities. This applies not only to the losses of the Wagner Group but also for the Russian armed forces as it is believed that Russian authorities 'routinely undercount its war dead and injured.'<sup>50</sup> To avoid public unrest, war victims are buried without notifying relatives or family by using anonymous mass graves.<sup>51</sup> The losses of these private companies do not count in the official Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) reports of how many servicemen have died or been injured.<sup>52</sup> Just as the involvement of the Wagner Group during the annexation of Crimea in 2014, it shows that the Russian government is laying a veil of obscurity on the use of PMSCs, in order not to be kept responsible for the actions of the PMSCs, thus playing the card of murdered innocence.

In its early years, the Wagner Group was known for recruiting former elite soldiers from the special forces and VDV (Russia's airborne troopers), but during the war in Ukraine, many Wagner fighters were killed, and the recruitment of new fighters declined rapidly. Prigozhin and other Wagner officials frequently tried to recruit new personnel in Russian correction facilities which, according to the United Nations' High Commissioner for Human Rights, sometimes involved threats and intimidation. Other prisoners were promised better salaries and offered pardons for criminal sentences in exchange for fighting in Ukraine.<sup>53</sup> So, in the case of the Wagner Group, the reasons for using type 1 PMSCs, respectively 'well-trained contractors' and 'high professional standards,' were shifting quite negatively during their participation in Russian combat operations. Yet, despite this, Russian authorities continued to deploy the Wagner Group as success with regular Russian units failed to materialise.

Meanwhile, Prigozhin made it clear that he disagreed with the way the war was being conducted, criticising Russian Defense Minister, Sergei Shoigu, and Russia's Chief of the General Staff, General Valery Gerasimov. Prigozhin, owner of a large business empire, made skillful use of his media channels to openly express, along with other critical military bloggers, his dissatisfaction with the direction of the war.<sup>54</sup> He also openly complained about the lack of sufficient logistical support from

<sup>49</sup> Camut, "Over 20,000 Wagner troops killed, 40,000 wounded in Ukraine: Prigozhin-Linked Channel."

<sup>50</sup> Cooper, Gibbons-Neff, Schmitt, and Barnes, "Troop deaths and injuries in Ukraine War near 500,000, U.S. Officials say."

<sup>51</sup> Het Nieuwsblad, "Zeven massagraven met Wagner-strijders gevonden in Rusland."

<sup>52</sup> Rácz, "Band of brothers: The Wagner Group and the Russian State."

<sup>53</sup> "Russian Federation: UN experts alarmed by recruitment of prisoners by 'Wagner Group.'"

<sup>54</sup> Lister, Sciutto, and Ilyushina, "Exclusive: Putin's chef, the man behind the troll factory."

Russian forces while the Wagner Group was battling for Bakhmut and suffered huge losses.<sup>55</sup>

During Friday, 23rd June 2023, tempers ran so high that Prigozhin declared an ‘all-out war’ on the Russian authorities and led his Wagner Group to march toward Moscow. The mutiny, which embarrassed President Putin, took Russian forces completely by surprise. It developed at lightning speed and ended in great confusion and chaos. The Wagner Group moved from the Donbas region to Rostov-on-Don in Russia, where they seized control of the headquarters of the Southern Military District, and then advanced toward Moscow.<sup>56</sup>

Late in the evening of 24th June 2023, Prigozhin announced the end of the action, following a deal with Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko.<sup>57</sup> After an initial period of silence, Putin eventually reacted furiously to the coup, labelling it treasonous and ‘a stab in the back of our country and our people.’<sup>58</sup> The Wagner Group would withdraw to Belarus and it was unclear what was going to happen to Wagner operations in Africa and Syria. Putin himself continued to vehemently deny that the Russian Federation had officially deployed the Wagner Group. Even after Wagner’s rebellion in June 2023, Putin insisted in an interview with the Russian daily newspaper *Kommersant* that the Wagner Group never existed because, Putin indicated, PMSCs are formally banned following Russian law.<sup>59</sup> This fits in perfectly with the already mentioned reason of plausible deniability.

Nearly two months later, on Wednesday 23rd August 2023, a business jet crashed on its way from Moscow to Saint Petersburg. According to Russian aviation authorities among the ten figures were key officials of the Wagner Group, including Yevgeny Prigozhin.<sup>60</sup> Despite all suspicions, the Russian authorities have denied any involvement in the accident.<sup>61</sup> The chain of events leading to the presumed death of Prigozhin seems to fit in perfectly with the already mentioned reason of plausible deniability by the Russian president and the Russian authorities.

Conclusively what’s interesting to mention is the fact that the Wagner group seemingly does not meet the requirements of a ‘free’ market company as PMSCs do. The fact that they use governmental training grounds and were equipped by the Russian armed forces show a huge involvement of the authorities and may influence the way Wagner operates. It is remarkable that the Wagner uprising even

<sup>55</sup> Taube, “Who’s who in the Prigozhin-Kremlin conflict?”

<sup>56</sup> Blazakis, Clarke, Fink, and Steinberg, “Wagner Group: The evolution of a private army,” 5.

<sup>57</sup> Stognei, Fedor and Evans, “Wagner troops withdraw as Russian uprising leaves Vladimir Putin weakened.”

<sup>58</sup> Sauer and Roth, “Putin accuses Wagner chief of treason and vows to ‘neutralize’ uprising.”

<sup>59</sup> Hodge, “Wagner ‘does not exist’: why Putin claims a rift in the mercenary group.”

<sup>60</sup> Smith, “Jet crash victim who died alongside Prigozhin.”

<sup>61</sup> Dixon and Ebel, “Prigozhin confidant says fatal plane crash shows no one is safe.”

existed! The argument Prigozhin used, the lack of logistical support for Wagner troops in the form of ammunition supply and military equipment would lead in a free market to cancellation of the contract. Instead Prigozhin started a revolt and a march towards Moscow. He might have used his strong influence to gain leverage over Putin, as he felt that his powers were daunting. In his internal feud with Defense minister Sergei Shoigu, Prigozhin needed a deal to get out as long as he could. For Putin it would cost too much, in terms of people, materiel and public support to fight Wagner troops than to bargain and give in to Prigozhin. According to William Partlett of the University of Melbourne this uprising shows how intra-elite disputes are ‘resolved’ in modern Russia, resembling the prerogative state of Nazi Germany.<sup>62</sup> It makes the interconnectedness between Prigozhin, his Wagner group, and Putin painfully clear. As András Rác stated in his article that instead of using the Russian narrative, according to which Wagner is a private military company, Wagner should be viewed as a classic proxy organisation and handled accordingly.<sup>63</sup>

## 7. The lesser-known PMSC Redut

Besides the Wagner Group, Redut also appears to have played a significant role in this war. PMSC Redut, acting as a type 1 PMSC during the Russia-Ukraine war, was founded in 2008, and initially belonged to the family of anti-terrorist PMSCs. The initial Redut organisation was largely composed of Russian ex-military personnel, drawn from the 45th Special Forces Regiment of the Russian Airborne Forces. Redut reportedly has particularly close ties to the Russian Ministry of Defense.<sup>64</sup> This makes plausible deniability as a reason to hire a PMSC difficult if not impossible. However, Russian authorities made no further announcements about Redut’s actions during the Russia-Ukraine war, trying to downplay their responsibility for Redut’s activities or even denying any governmental involvement. Although Russia strongly denies any involvement in Redut, the markers clearly show a different story, making the reason for plausible deniability at least questionable.

According to insiders, Redut did not comply with international regulations, such as the Montreux Document and the ICoCa Code, just like the Wagner Group did not. Another similarity with the Wagner Group is that it immediately became clear that they acted brutally during combat operations in Syria. This behaviour does question the reason for maintaining a high professional standard (ethics). Redut is now completely

<sup>62</sup> Partlett, “Why Prigozhin’s march on Moscow was not a coup.”

<sup>63</sup> Rác, “Band of brothers.”

<sup>64</sup> Østensen, and Bukkvoll, “Russian use of private military and security companies – the implications for European and Norwegian Security,” 24-25.

under the control of the GRu, which is also known as the least sophisticated Russian security service with often a rougher approach. Redut asserts complete loyalty to Russia's state institutions, since they also depend on it for ammunition, equipment, and logistics. Nevertheless, the group still enjoys a certain degree of autonomy, but not comparable to the latitude Prigozhin claimed for the Wagner Group.<sup>65</sup>

The Russian General Staff intended that Redut would become an apprehensive competitor to the Wagner Group, as the Wagner Group came less and less under control. On 24th February 2022, Redut was to play a significant role in the attack on Kyiv and the planned killing of the Zelensky government.<sup>66</sup> The deputy head of the GRu, Lieutenant General Vladimir Alexeyev, had made plans for this part of the Russian attack on Ukraine. Redut recruited many former Wagner and Special Forces members in the period leading up to the Russia-Ukraine, totalling several thousand by January 2022, which infuriated Wagner chief Prigozhin. Like the Wagner Group, Redut is a rapidly deployable intervention force for the Russian government. When units are needed immediately to protect Russian interests, the Russian government can call on companies like Redut. Their flexibility is a strength and, as already mentioned, one of the reasons for governments to hire PMSCs. Redut suffered heavy losses of up to 90% of their strength during the advance to Kyiv in the first weeks of the war. Due to the weakening of Redut, Prigozhin's Wagner Group became the leading PMSC during this war.<sup>67</sup>

It is notable that Redut initially had many well-trained operators in its ranks, drawn from the Wagner Group but also from Russian Special Forces, as the third reason for using type 1 PMSCs specifies. However, the question remains as to whether Redut was also able to recruit suitable personnel after the early stages of the Russia-Ukraine war to complement the huge losses it suffered at the beginning of the war. After all, the Russian armed forces and the Wagner Group were desperate for qualified personnel. As with the Wagner Group, it is doubtful whether Redut pursued high professional standards, as the fifth reason for using type 1 PMSCs indicates. During the Russian attack on the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv, which incidentally failed, the operators of Redut fought doggedly and suffered many losses, making it plausible that ethical and humane values were not always considered.

In early 2023, Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin authorised *Gazprom Neft*, a subsidiary of Russian energy giant Gazprom, to establish its own PMSC. The

<sup>65</sup> Chkhaidze, "PMC Redut: The Wagner Group's potential replacement."

<sup>66</sup> For more background information on the planned killing of the Zelensky administration see: Han Bouwmeester with his chapter 'Putin's miscalculation: the effectiveness of Russia's new-type warfare in Ukraine' in this book.

<sup>67</sup> Oliphant, "Inside ambitious mercenary outfit Redut, the Wagner rival linked to the Russian spy service."

new PMSC started under the name *Gazprom Neft Security*. It was led by former high-ranking members of Russia's Federal Security Service (FSS) and the Ministry of Internal Affairs.<sup>68</sup> Later that year, in April 2023, the Russian Ministry of Defense forced several members of Gazprom Neft Security to sign contracts for Redut to fight under their leadership in the Russia-Ukraine war.<sup>69</sup> Gazprom never admitted its involvement in the formation of PMSCs. Instead, in the past, the company sought to project a traditional Western corporate image to trading partners in Europe by making environmental, social and governance commitments. Moreover, Gazprom sponsored the UEFA Champions League for several years.<sup>70</sup>

## 8. Conclusion

This chapter concentrated on the question: 'Do Wagner and Redut's combat operations in the Russia-Ukraine conflict conform to views on modern Private Military and Security Companies?' Answering this question, however, is not simple. Mercenaries meet the views on PMSCs in the twilight, and circumstances decide whether they are considered as white or black knights. They often lack direct supervision by legitimate authorities. This means that they are more likely to derail than contractors belonging to a PMSC that respect international esteemed values, as indicated in the ICoCa Code and the Montreux Document. Many PMSCs focus on being type 2 and 3 companies. They are often well organised and already affiliated to ICoCa. Moreover, they also pursue a certain professional standard for themselves to be hired. PMSCs that concentrate only on type 1 tasks are no affiliates of ICoCa, and, as a result, do not comply with the Code. It is therefore often questionable how and whether they will behave on the battlefield.

With regard to the fourth reason for hiring a PMSC (a PMSC is a low cost solution), this question could not be answered properly in this chapter and is therefore marked with a question mark. The information on the costs of hiring a PMSC was at best questionable and incomplete. According to a RAND study, Putin stated that Wagner had been paid an amount of 86.26 billion rubles (\$1 billion) between May 2022 and May 2023 to cover wages,<sup>71</sup> however it is difficult to make a cost estimate of a comparable Russian armed forces unit.

<sup>68</sup> Sukhankin, "The 'Privatization of Force' presses on in Russia, Part one."

<sup>69</sup> "It's not just Wagner, at least three Gazprom-linked private military companies now have fighters in Ukraine."

<sup>70</sup> Ivanova, Miller and Seddon, "'Stream' and 'Torch': the Gazprom-backed militias fighting in Ukraine."

<sup>71</sup> Dunigan, "Where will all the Wagner group mercenaries go now that Russia has exiled their leader?"

| Reasons to hire PMSCs for combat operations        | PMSCs used by Russian authorities                                                     |                                                                                       |
|----------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                                    | Wagner                                                                                | Redut                                                                                 |
| Flexibility                                        | ✓                                                                                     | ✓                                                                                     |
| Plausible deniability                              | ✓                                                                                     | ✓ × (questionable because of its obvious ties to the Russian authorities)             |
| Professionalism (high level of expertise-training) | ✓ → × (changed over the course of the conflict due to personnel shortages and losses) | ✓ → × (changed over the course of the conflict due to personnel shortages and losses) |
| Low cost solution                                  | Further research needed                                                               | Further research needed                                                               |
| High professional standard (ethics: moral code)    | ×                                                                                     | ×                                                                                     |

Table 22.1: The reasons to use PMSCs for combat operations applied to Wagner and Redut

The Wagner Group and Redut did not conform to the views of modern PMSCs and ignored the ICoCa Code and Montreux Document. Contractors of both companies can be considered Russian commercial warriors on the battlefield. The two PMSCs were involved in brutal combat operations during the Russia-Ukraine war and initially had experienced personnel. The high number of casualties made it almost impossible to recruit new well-qualified personnel, especially as the Russian armed forces sought to include conscripts in their ranks. Moreover, it is questionable whether both PMSCs were able to uphold a professional standard consisting of humane values during the intensive combat actions in which many contractors were killed. Finally, both PMSCs operated in a twilight zone, because of which the Russian authorities denied any involvement in the deployment of PMSCs during the Russia-Ukraine war and were thus able to avoid responsibility for the violent activities of both PMSCs. In addition to these similarities, there was a major difference between the two PMSCs: while the Wagner Group started to operate more and more independently, Redut remained under full control of Russian authorities. Indeed, Redut was put forward by the Russian authorities to compete with the Wagner Group in an attempt to diminish the influence of the Wagner Group in which Prigozhin was increasingly distancing his PMSC from the Russian armed forces, during this Russia-Ukraine war.

## 9. Final remarks

This chapter provides a description of PMSCs in general, and of Russian-oriented PMSCs during the Russia-Ukraine War in particular. Now it may seem to many as if only the Wagner Group was active as a PMSC during this war, but nothing could be further from the truth. PMSCs were active on both sides, Russian and Ukrainian. Only the linkage of events was most notable with the Wagner Group, from the protracted and bloody fighting around Bakhmut, to utterances of Yevgeny Prigozhin, the rebellion of the Wagner Group, and the presumed death of Prigozhin. Nevertheless, it is necessary to make two observations.

First, the Wagner Group, and to a lesser extent Redut, created a very negative image of PMSCs, but it would be unfair to consider all PMSCs in this way. After all, Wagner Group is a PMSC that fell into the first type, the so-called Military Provider Firm, and it acted ruthlessly, not obeying any rule regarding human rights and International Humanitarian Law. And although for a long time they were the only unit on the Russian front still making some progress with fierce fighting, the Russian authorities were having increasing troubles to keep a grip on the Wagner Group. Russia's Defense Minister, Sergey Shoigu, had already benefitted from other Russian PMSCs that could compete with the Wagner Group in the run-up to the Russian-Ukrainian war. Globally, there are several PMSCs that are in stark contrast to the Wagner Group; many of these PMSCs do not have a fighting role but rather provide advisory and support services which means that, unlike the Wagner Group, they are not found close to the front. Moreover, several PMSCs have committed themselves to the ICoCa and several nations are striving to respect the Montreux Document.

Second, during the writing of this chapter, in the period September – October 2023, it became apparent that all sorts of elements of the Wagner Group were reappearing at the front. According to a recent update of the British intelligence service large elements of The Wagner Group have likely been reassigned to serve in the Russian National Guard – the *Rosgvardiya*<sup>72</sup> – and the mercenary group has ‘resumed active recruitment.’ It also mentioned the fact that Pavel, the son of, Prigozhin is likely to be leading one of these units. Other Wagner-groups have likely joined Redut.<sup>73</sup> It shows that the Wagner Group's story is not over yet. The performance of the Wagner Group and of the other PMSCs during this war requires additional and extensive academic research. Indeed, the deployment of PMSCs on

<sup>72</sup> *Rosgvardiya* is the special Russian National Guard, placed directly under the authority of the Russian President

<sup>73</sup> Taylor, “British Intelligence: Wagner Group mercenaries have likely been folded into Russian National Guard.”

the battlefield has become indispensable in contemporary warfare. PMSCs will play an increasingly prominent role in future conflicts and contribute to further commercialisation of the battlefield.

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