

1. Introduction

“Wagner chief Yevgeny Prigozhin presumed dead after Russia plane crash”¹

This headline appeared in media outlets around the world in late August 2023. Yevgeny Prigozhin, Russian oligarch, caterer and “Putin’s chef”, head of the notorious Wagner Group and for a short time even traitor and rebel against the Russian government, met his end alongside several of his trustees. While the death was not mourned by many, especially in the European Union (EU), the United States of America (US/A) and Ukraine, it raised many questions: Was he murdered or was it an accident? If he was murdered, was the order given by Putin himself or by one of his various enemies in the Russian establishment? Finally, the most important question: What would happen to the Wagner Group? Was this the end of it? The first questions can only be answered speculatively and might remain a mystery altogether. The answers to the last two questions can only partially be answered, as Prigozhin’s death was only two months ago when this is written.² Nevertheless, it is a good moment to look at Wagner’s missions over the past few years, starting in Ukraine in 2014. This work has two aims: The first one is a descriptive part, to paint a coherent picture of the group’s actions from 2014 to August 2023, looking at the places where the group was (or still is) active and what it did/does there. The

1 Gardner, Frank; Greenall, Robert; Lukiv, Jaroslav (2023): Wagner chief Yevgeny Prigozhin presumed dead after Russia plane crash. In: BBC News, 24.08.2023. URL: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-66599733> [31.10.2023].

2 This work was written between May and November 2023. Any events after these dates have not been taken into account.

second aim is to look at the actions of Wagner through the lens of the theoretical constructs of legitimacy and accountability, asking

How can the legitimacy and accountability of the Wagner Group be classified?

As this work will be written in the contextual nexus between security studies and critical security studies, it is important to specify the term security for the thesis before moving on to legitimacy and accountability. The next step is to define the concepts of legitimacy and accountability. There are two ways of approaching both. The first one is the theoretical perspective. The concepts have been debated by numerous authors from different backgrounds, so both can be examined without being specifically modified for a subject. The second approach is exactly that, both concepts modified specifically for Private Military Companies (PMCs). This work will discuss both perspectives, to define an adapted notion of legitimacy and accountability.

Using the established terms of the analysis grid, Wagner will be analyzed by examining three specific relationships: Wagner and its operational states, Wagner and the Russian State and Wagner and the international system. This allows reviewing the history of the group and gathering as much information as possible without curtailing the work by focusing only on one specific type of operation. Wagner is active in many countries, and information about what is happening there varies from place to place as much as the missions themselves do. Therefore, it is useful not to apply the same standards to a defined set of countries, but to look at every piece of information and use it to paint a complete picture.

1.1 Literature Review

Overall, this work will be built on three main pillars, which will be presented in the following section.

International Security

It would be difficult to pinpoint the exact moment in time, when the first scholar wrote about international security. Rather than looking at the individual contributions written over time, this work will rely primarily on two anthologies, namely “International Security Studies: Theory and Practice,” edited by Peter Hough, Andrew Moran, Bruce Pilbeam, and Wendy Stokes from 2021, and “Security Studies: An Introduction,” edited by Paul D. Williams from 2008. The reason for this is rather practical: This is not intended to be a purely theoretical work and looking at the whole genesis of the concept of international security could fill more than one master’s thesis. In these two anthologies though, several authors – like Shahin Malik, Edward Smith, Colin Ellman, and Matt McDonald – have made valuable contributions in presenting different approaches to the concept of international security, which is a good basis to build on. Still, other works will be included as well, especially when whole schools of thought are based on them, such as “Security: A New Framework for Analysis” from 1998 by Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde, as this was the main basis for the Copenhagen School. Another example is Buzan’s “People, States and Fear,” which is not exactly foundational for a school of thought, but has been mentioned by several authors of the field as one of the most influential works in international security studies. The idea is to articulate a concept for security for this work, by analyzing the different schools of thought.

The concepts of Legitimacy and Accountability

In 2008, Peter Walgenbach and Renate Meyer published their work “Neoinstitutionalistische Organisationstheorie”. While most of the contents are not relevant to this thesis, their definition of legitimacy is a good starting point, also supported by the texts of Mark Suchman from 1995. Using their work, the concept of legitimacy will be approached from a theoretical perspective. On the other hand, considering Wagner as a PMC, there is a practical approach to this topic, which looks at the idea of legitimacy in relation to PMCs. One very important

contribution is “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,” which has been signed by many states operating with or hosting PMCs and provides a good overview on possible approaches to the topic. Furthermore, several authors such as Deborah Avant in “The Market for Force: The Consequences of Privatizing Security” in 2005 and Peter Singer in “Corporate Warriors: The Rise of the Privatized Military Industry” in 2003 have discussed the practical reasons why states might want to use a PMC and what would give them legitimacy. These reasons are supported by additional statements of several experts on the topic in Nick Bicancic’s documentation “The Shadow Company,” in which – among others – Singer, Madelaine Drohan, and Robert Young Pelton present some thoughts and data on the state of PMCs and what makes them legitimate in the eyes of some and illegitimate in the eyes of others. Alongside these comments, there will also be a number of news articles about the activities of PMCs to support the arguments presented.

The concept of accountability will be approached in a similar way. First, there will be two theoretical approaches, one by Ronald Oaker-son from 1989 and the other by Andreas Schedler from 1999. Both are intended to open up the debate and then to look at the practical concepts of holding PMCs accountable. Marcus Hedahl and Christine Huskey made valuable contributions in *Criminal Justice Ethics* Volume 31, Issue 3 in December 2012, which they dedicated completely to the question of the accountability of PMCs. Other significant works are again presented by Singer, who also wrote several papers on the question of accountability, as well as parts of the Montreux Document and more statements taken from Bicancic’s documentation and news reports. This will create a solid foundation for the analysis of the group’s relations.

The Wagner Group

The Wagner Group has received increasing interest from scholars in recent years. One of the most valuable contributions at this time was

made by Candace Rondeaux in 2019 in “Decoding the Wagner Group: Analyzing the Role of Private Military Security Contractors in Russian Proxy Warfare.” In her work, she analyzed the whereabouts of the group and how they were and are used in the Kremlin’s strategy. Still, her work can only contribute to this one in a limited way, due to its unique approach to accountability and legitimacy paired with its understanding of security. The most important basis for this work will be the report by Julian Rademeyer, Julia Stanyard, and Thierry Vircoulon for Global Initiative “The grey zone: Russia’s military, mercenary and criminal engagement in Africa,” in which they thoroughly examine Wagner’s actions in several African countries. In addition, there are several news reports about actions of the Wagner Group, as well as documentaries by the BBC and Deutsche Welle (DW). Finally, there are original sources such as statements by the Russian Government or an interview with the current president of Mali. The aim is to gather as much information as possible to paint a coherent picture of the group’s development over time and to analyze them in terms of accountability and legitimacy.

By formulating approaches to legitimacy and accountability in the context of this work, two significant research gaps can be detected. The first one is that the ideas of legitimacy and accountability have mostly been thought from a “Western” perspective, meaning that authors mostly assumed that a PMC operated in a constitutional state. While this work will touch on this subject, it does not aim to dismantle it, as it is not a theoretical one. The second gap is that, so far, no author has analyzed the Wagner Group through the lens of accountability and legitimacy. The latter gap will be closed by this thesis.

1.2 Definition

While Private Military Companies have been around for some years now, there is no universally accepted definition of what a PMC is. The following section will outline the various possibilities of what a PMC is and is not. While one could debate the different meanings

and concepts, it would unnecessarily prolong the work. Therefore, this thesis will rely on the differentiations made by Singer in “Corporate Warriors”.

While it is difficult to find common denominator between all PM-Cs, Singer presents one: “The single unifying factor for the privatized military industry [...] is that all the firms within it offer services that fall within the military domain.”³ The range of services is still quite wide and is explained by the “Tip of the Spear” typology, which categorizes PMCs according to their proximity to the battlefield. Closest to the battle are “Military Provider Firms,” which “provide services at the forefront of the battlespace, by engaging in actual fighting, either as line units or specialists (for example, combat pilots) and/or direct command and control of field units.”⁴ The second type of firm are “Military Consulting Firms,” “that provide advisory and training services integral to the operation and restructuring of a client’s armed forces [...] They offer strategic, operational, and/or organizational analysis.”⁵ The biggest difference between consulting companies and provider firms is that, officially, consultants are very close to the units they advise, but do not engage in confrontations themselves. As a third category, Singer presents “Military Support Companies” that “provide supplementary military services [...] These privatized functions, include nonlethal aid [sic!] and assistance, including logistics, intelligence, technical support, supply, and transportation.”⁶ Using these three categories, it will be seen whether it is possible to place Wagner within them or not. Two things should be noted: As is often the case when academic criteria meet reality, it may not be possible to make a final, clearly separable classification, as a company might offer services that fit two or even three categories. A second argument is mentioned by Singer himself, especially concerning military providers, as they are the ones getting the biggest publicity:

3 Singer, Peter Warren (2003): *Corporate Warriors. The Rise of the Privatized Military Industry*. Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press. P. 88.

4 Ibid. P. 92.

5 Ibid. P. 95.

6 Ibid. P. 97.

“For this reason, understandably, most firms within this sector [Military Provider Firms; Author’s Note] are quick to deny that they offer tactical military services, often claiming just to be military advisers. [...] Others claim to only be providing “security” or “guarding facilities”. But, as noted earlier, this security entails military-style protection, from military threats in the midst of war.”⁷

This does not make Singer’s classifications any less useful or practicable. Rather, it sharpens the analysis, as it shows that when classifying something, it is important to look at what a company does rather than listening to what it says it does. With these definitions at hand, it is now time to move on to the theoretical chapter, which will establish an analytical framework.

⁷ Ibid. P. 95.

