**What Mercenaries Look Like in 2022**

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nTPjDtzD_sQ>

To many, “mercenary” is a dirty word in most modern contexts. The days of the [Hessians](https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/hessians/#:~:text=The%20term%20%22Hessians%22%20refers%20to,also%20saw%20action%20in%20America.), German soldiers of fortune who fought against the American Revolution, seem far behind us in today’s setting, where nation-states and their armies are well regulated and supposedly governed by international treaties. Still, for most of history, mercenaries have appeared in major global conflicts.

Today a mercenary isn’t necessarily a soldier of fortune. When we call someone a “mercenary,” it means they are motivated almost entirely by profit and willing to get it by any means. Of course, we’ve all seen mercenaries in this sense: political grifters selling ideologies they don’t truly believe, bullish stockbrokers and crypto enthusiasts, coworkers who will do anything for a raise or a promotion – the list goes on. But, that old-world definition of a mercenary — those who will wage war on behalf of someone else in the name of profit — is still unfortunately relevant.

These mercenaries are known as private military contractors (PMCs) today. They’ve been a [staple](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/sep/11/us-afghanistan-iraq-defense-spending) in the Iraq and Afghan wars of the last two decades, making headlines in 2007 when [Blackwater](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/dec/23/trump-pardons-blackwater-contractors-jailed-for-massacre-of-iraq-civilians), an American firm, gunned down 17 Iraqi civilians in Baghdad. American PMC, Caci International, was also implicated in the horrific [torture](https://www.theguardian.com/law/2014/jun/30/iraq-lawsuit-defense-contractor-torture-abu-graib) of inmates detained at the infamous Abu Ghraib prison.

Despite the war crimes committed by contractors in Iraq, the number of private contractors used in Afghanistan nearly [tripled](https://www.businessinsider.com/this-is-how-many-private-contractors-and-us-troops-are-in-afghanistan-2017-8) the American presence deployed in the region. Although not all of these contractors were security personnel, the growing reliance on private entities in international conflicts is deeply concerning.

**The Murky Legalities of PMCs**

Established in 1989, the International Convention Against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries (or the [Mercenary Convention](https://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/mercenaries/docs/1989UNConvention_English.pdf)) criminalizes the use of mercenaries. The convention officially entered into force in 2001 and its terminology is important. After all, if PMCs still identified themselves as mercenaries, their use might be a thing of the past.

The convention defines mercenaries according to six criteria, none of which make the task of differentiating between PMCs and mercenaries much simpler. But broadly speaking, the convention defines mercenaries as such:

1. A mercenary is “specially recruited”
2. A mercenary is to “take direct part in hostilities”
3. A mercenary is “motivated by private gain”
4. A mercenary is not “a national of a party to the conflict”
5. A mercenary is not “a member of the armed forces of a party to the conflict”
6. A mercenary is not “sent on official duty by a non-party state”

Unfortunately, none of these factors make it terribly easy to differentiate the two. For example, in 2004, Simon Mann’s attempted [coup](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/an-african-adventure-inside-story-of-the-wonga-coup-794470.html) in Equatorial Guinea constituted a clear example of mercenary work, but his case is somewhat unique.

Konec formuláře

Začátek formuláře

Konec formuláře

Mann and almost 70 other mercenaries were arrested in Harare, Zimbabwe with $100,000 worth of weapons. Their goal was to overthrow the government of Teodoro Obiang and install exiled opposition leader, Severo Moto. Hired by a group of private interests including Margarette Thatcher’s son, [Mark Thatcher](https://www.csis.org/analysis/wonga-coup-transparency-and-conspiracy-equatorial-guinea), to do just that, the “Wonga coup” under Mann meets all the criteria under the Mercenary Convention.

Generally, offensive roles and defensive or logistical roles in a warzone differentiate PMCs from mercenaries. A PMC then is paid to be a part of a military force, without taking a direct, or offensive role in the conflict. In other words, PMCs can’t be involved in hostilities, but they can defend themselves if attacked. Still, this line is murky at best. As Mann himself pointed out in his [Oxford Union](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B4nXopGlcu8) address:

“The line between defence and offence gets very quickly blurred. So, immediately, any decent soldier will start thinking ‘instead of sitting here waiting to be shot. Why don’t we go out there and bag the bad guys before they manage to shoot us?’ and suddenly, the rules start to get bent.”

**The Wagner Group**

There is a wealth of journalism covering the West’s reliance on PMCs, especially their heavy use by the American government to lower troop counts in unpopular wars like Iraq and Afghanistan. There is also a wealth of reporting on the various war crimes and human rights abuses committed by American PMCs, like the contractors who tortured inmates in Abu Ghraib and Blackwater. The role of Russian mercenaries in more recent conflicts is less discussed. The Wagner group is one such mercenary company.

In 2014, the Wagner Group made its international debut when Russia invaded Crimea. Nicknamed the “[little green men](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/16/who-are-men-eastern-ukraine-tanks)” because of their unmarked green uniforms, these men were actually unidentified Russian-aligned military units in the region. According to a report from the [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/07/08/putin-s-not-so-secret-mercenaries-patronage-geopolitics-and-wagner-group-pub-79442), members of these same forces quickly developed into a permanent private-military force under the command of Russian intelligence veteran Dmitry Utkin.

True to form, allegations surrounding the Wagner Group’s involvement in similarly grave human rights abuses to its American counterparts, including torture and the killing of civilians, have emerged. It has been [accused](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/mar/30/russian-mercenaries-accused-of-human-rights-abuses-in-car-un-group-experts-wagner-group-violence-election) of summary executions and forced displacement in the Central African Republic. It has also occupied similar roles on the battlefield, including training foreign soldiers and providing security for extractive industries.

**Different Mercenaries, Same Story**

The [Kremlin](https://www.csis.org/blogs/post-soviet-post/band-brothers-wagner-group-and-russian-state) benefits from the services of PMCs for many of the same reasons as the [White House](https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/08/iraq-afghanistan-contractor-pentagon-obama/495731/). By hiring contractors, governments can lower troop counts and official death tolls. All the while, the imperialist ambitions of both nations can advance through the use of these forces. Both the US and Russia have also attempted to valorize private military personnel. A Russian language film entitled “The Tourist” [glorifies](https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/05/21/new-movie-depicting-heroic-russian-instructors-in-central-african-republic-linked-to-putins-chef-a73973) the role of PMCs in the Central African Republic. As for the Americans, a prime example is Hollywood’s “Expendables” franchise.

Another instance of the Wagner Group’s involvement is in Mali. Amidst deteriorating relationships between France and the military junta in [Mali](https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220204-private-military-contractors-bolster-russian-influence-in-africa), the Malian government recruited the Wagner Group to deal with the ongoing security crisis. Here, it is filling a vacuum left by the failures of French interventionism and establishing itself as a partner to governments in the region. During the Cold War, the Soviets used the same tactics to become an alternative partner to the West for development and security assistance. It’s still imperialism, but they don’t carry the baggage of centuries of colonial rule in the continent.

What makes the Wagner Group and other Russian PMCs unique is their legal status. They exist as private entities that are not necessarily traded companies that private investors can buy into like [Frontier Service Group](https://www.bloomberg.com/quote/500:HK), formerly associated with Erik Prince, the founder of Blackwater, or [Constellis Holdings](https://www.bloomberg.com/profile/company/0251892D:US). The Wagner Group isn’t even a registered business in Russia. Instead, it represents a network of contractors who can advance the Kremlin’s foreign policy objectives. One of Putin’s close allies, Yevgeny Prigozhin, is thought to be the [actor](https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/07/06/what-is-wagner-group-russia-mercenaries-military-contractor/) bringing together this diverse network of hired guns, though he has denied these allegations.

Since their 2014 deployment in Ukraine, Russian PMCs have participated in conflicts in Syria, Sudan, Mozambique, Madagascar, and Libya. There is also some speculation they are involved in the ongoing invasion of [Ukraine](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/ukraine-russia-war-wagner-group-mercenaries-b2024848.html).

**White Supremacy and Mercenaries**

The name “Wagner Group” is a curious one. For one, Wagner was a German composer, not a Russian one. For another, what could a long-deceased opera writer have to do with a collective that fights wars for profit?

The answer is white supremacy. Utkin is [believed](https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/07/06/what-is-wagner-group-russia-mercenaries-military-contractor/) to have been enamoured with Nazi Germany, and Wagner’s music is frequently [associated](https://holocaustmusic.ort.org/politics-and-propaganda/third-reich/wagner-richard/) with Nazi propaganda.

That said, the modern mercenary industry is in many ways born out of the white supremacist states of Apartheid South Africa and [Rhodesia](https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/06/american-soldiers-rhodesia-angola-conservative-movement). For example, these same movements created the magazine “Soldier of Fortune,” still active today, which has been very popular in the white supremacist and PMC communities.

That’s not to say all mercenaries are white supremacists or that white supremacy is the dominant motivation behind the Wagner Group, but the privatization of state violence in foreign countries has been tied to white supremacy for a very long time. [Erik Prince](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VV_skhRZ0Mw), Blackwater’s founder and noted PMC advocate, traced his own company’s lineage to the private endeavours that founded many of the American colonies and other British colonial companies in a 2017 speech. As with all European colonialism, these endeavours were inherently built on white supremacy.

**Privatizing Empire**

When a student in attendance at Simon Mann’s Oxford Union address asked him what advice he would give to an aspiring young mercenary. He joked, “Well, firstly, you’ve gotta find a really good oil and gas company to work for.” Mann’s response speaks volumes to the nature of this work.

As PMCs become increasingly prevalent in war zones worldwide, the overlap between private economic interests and foreign policy priorities widens. Now, the ways in which those foreign policy interests are being pursued is via private firms.

PMCs aren’t the only way that foreign policy is being [privatized](https://www.jstor.org/stable/44631171). International development is also becoming increasingly reliant on private partnerships. All of this points to an alarming trend in which states can push for colonial practices without appearing to directly partake in colonialism.

When we consider this industry’s long-standing relationship with white supremacy and the current deployment of PMCs throughout much of the formerly colonized world, the prevalence of these privatized warfighters seems to represent the latest strain of imperialism. The future appears eerily similar to the past as the employment of PMCs becomes normalized by major powers across blocs.

*Edited by Pearl Zhou*