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Russia in Africa: Embedded Markets in Violence

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Contents

Key Findings

- The political disorder of the late 20th century created the conditions for the emergence of markets in violence in Russia and numerous African states.
- Similarities exist between the protective services provided by traditional private security companies in Russia and those provided to African clients by the Wagner Group.
- Though Wagner's client states exhibited similar characteristics, its market entry strategies differed depending on local conditions, with varying degrees of support provided by the Russian state.
- What Wagner's successful deployments had in common was an opportunistic identification and exploitation of market niches that provided financial profit and political returns.
- Successful deployments required Wagner to embed itself in local political ecosystems and receive support from both the Russian state and local elites.
- In the case of Central African Republic, the lack of Russian state presence provided Wagner the freedom to act as the Russian state, enabling it to provide protective services and embed itself in the local political marketplace without interference.
- The Wagner Group's deployments often filled a void, replacing their clients' established security partners.
- The Wagner Group's origins lie in the proliferation of private security companies and private protection companies in 1990s Russia.
- Russian state support for Wagner's deployments hinged on its potential to advance Russia's strategic interests abroad.
- In Madagascar and Mozambique, unfavourable local conditions and lack of Russian state support resulted in Wagner's early withdrawals.

- Russia and the African states where Wagner has operated have a shared historical experience in that the state monopoly on violence was at some point dismantled, occurring through fiscal crisis or civil war.

- The supply of commercial violence in Russia and Africa originates in similar circumstances; oversupply of men formerly employed in the armed services along with violent entrepreneurs seeking to capitalize on markets lacking sufficient legal protections. This supply is sustained by the availability of military labour in prisons in Russia, and among underemployed youth in Africa.

Abstract

This paper analyses the Wagner Group's operations in Africa through the lens of Alex de Waal's political marketplace framework, drawing connections between Russia's domestic market for violence and those of Wagner's African client states. It argues that the privatization of security in 1990s Russia created the conditions for the emergence of Wagner, similar to the political upheaval experienced by many African countries in the late 20th century. By examining the political and security environments of the African countries to which Wagner has deployed, this paper demonstrates how Wagner embeds itself in local and regional political marketplaces, adapting its role based on local contexts.

The analysis compares Wagner's successful interventions with its failures, identifying the conditions that have shaped divergent outcomes. The paper explores Wagner's involvement in resource capture and commercial ventures, and its role in advancing Russian foreign policy. It highlights how Wagner's criminal behaviour reflects its ambiguous legal status—existing at the behest of both the Russian state and the autocratic rulers who elicit its services. Drawing from academic and investigative sources, this study provides insight into how Wagner occupies a niche in Africa's markets in violence.

Introduction

Russia's history has been marked by several periods of "Times of Troubles" – periods entailing massive political upheaval and crises - the most recent being the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union and emergence of the modern Russian state in the 1990s. For Russia, the 1990s saw a massive dose of shock therapy that was intended to destroy the centrally planned economy and bring about in its place an open market democratic system. The outcomes were entirely orthogonal to the democracy-autocracy and capitalist-communist dichotomies. Privatization meant the emergence of crony capitalism, not to say kleptocratic oligarchy—a political marketplace familiar from countries in the Global South where a combination of ultra-austerity and the explosion of violent entrepreneurs had caused many states to fall apart.

According to political scientist Robert Bates, political order results when the following two conditions are met: (1) rulers – whom he characterizes as "specialists in violence" – choose to employ the means of coercion to protect the creation of wealth rather than prey upon it and (2) private citizens choose to set weapons aside and to devote their time instead to the production of wealth and to the enjoyment of leisure.[1] These conditions existed for a brief but seminal historical moment in Russia—and in a more protracted way in many African states.

The late 20th century was also a time of upheaval for many African countries. Authoritarian rulers lost the patronage of their foreign backers as the end of the Cold War ushered in geopolitical realignments. According to Bates, the loss of foreign patronage, in addition to economic mismanagement and corruption by elites resulted in significant economic implosion and decline in public revenues. The subsequent decline in public revenues and subsequently, diminished public salaries, led many public servants to engage in predatory behaviour; "a bureaucracy that had been created to facilitate the lives of the citizens began instead to undermine their welfare. Its members began to feed themselves by consuming the time and money of those they once served."[2]

In Russia, the combination of overnight fortunes through the fire-sale of state assets, the dollarization of the illicit economy, and open financial borders, meant that Russia's new oligarchs spirited their billions away to global financial centres, chosen for opacity and ease of access. In some of these—London notably—they laundered their money and their reputation.

The large-scale downsizing of the security ministries saw hundreds of thousands of soldiers and officers from the security services unemployed, and many left of their own accord to pursue higher returns in the private market as specialists in violence. In Africa, soldiers too sought to supplement their low salaries through predation, seeking out opportunities to engage in violent entrepreneurship; “As the value of their salaries declined, soldiers began to pay themselves. Like doctors and nurses, they sold services to which the citizens were formally entitled.”[3]

While more small and medium-sized businesses grew in Russia’s weak regulatory environment with inadequate legal protections for business owners, the result was that commerce was regulated by informal violence, with the proliferation of extortion and violent crime by burgeoning criminal networks. Men with skills in spy craft and violence were in high demand. As gangs grew in numbers, so too grew the need for private protection. Private security companies (PSCs) and private protection companies (PPCs) proliferated.

From companies more readily identifiable as PSCs, emerged the Wagner Group, a private military company (PMC) that while technically illegal, was allowed to operate by the Russian state to serve its interests abroad. From its creation in 2014 and first deployments in Ukraine’s Donbas region, the Wagner Group grew in size and scope to include deployments in Africa and the Middle East, where it also pursued commercial ventures outside of its primary role providing security and conducting military operations.

Most analysis of the Wagner Group in Africa works from two premises, either explicit or implicit. One is that the Wagner Group and its patrons in the Kremlin are malevolent actors hostile to Western interests and the best interests of their African host countries, that engage in illicit and criminal activities and abuse human rights. The other is that they select fragile and failing states as targets of opportunity to strategically undermine western countries. This paper uses a different lens: the political marketplace.[4] It locates the origins of the Wagner Group in Russia’s domestic market in private violence and its operations in Africa within a political ecosystem that has striking structural similarities.

Background to Wagner Group

The Wagner Group's origins can be traced to the widescale emergence of PSCs and PPCs in Russia in the 1990s. One of Wagner's co-creators, Dmitry Utkin, began his career in the special forces wing of Russia's foreign military intelligence agency, the GRU, and served in both Chechen wars. Afterwards, he signed a contract with a conventional registered PSC, Moran Security Group, and led a Moran-affiliated mercenary group in Syria, called the Slavonic Corps. After serving in Syria, Utkin quit Moran and was put in contact with Yevgeny Prigozhin to create a mercenary group to field troops in Ukraine. This would come to be known as the Wagner Group, named after Utkin's callsign 'Wagner.'[5]

Notably, PMCs remain illegal in Russia. The Wagner Group's existence, especially considering its high profile, must then be dependent on assent from the highest levels of the Russian state. Informal relations between states and mercenaries are not new phenomena. As the Russian sociologist Vadim Volkov asserts, "relations between governments and private wielders of force, especially in the extraterritorial realm, were long based on temporary alliances rather than full-time service, on tactical considerations rather than legal norms."[6] Mercenaries would be commissioned by the state in times of war, as demonstrated with the Wagner Group's creation shortly after the outbreak of hostilities in eastern Ukraine, its subsequent deployment there, and later deployment to Syria and Libya.

Wagner exists at the behest of the Russian state, on an especially tight leash since the dramatic 2023 mutiny. Wagner operates in African states at the request of national leaders or prominent warlords, but in each case the three corners of the relationship—Wagner, Moscow, and the host state or client—is somewhat different. Russia's foreign policy decision-making can also be described as relatively informal as it is driven by the "Kremlin Towers" or "solar system" as described by Allard Duursma and Niklas Masuhr: "a highly personalized, networked conglomerate of different constituencies and personalities."[7] More broadly, how Russia is ruled and administered can be characterized as a "dual architecture" consisting of a hierarchical bureaucracy and informal networks of client-patron relationships.[8] In effect, Wagner would be a useful and adaptable conduit for Russia's foreign policy in Africa, using it to exploit anti-Western (particularly anti-French) sentiment in the Sahel, and using it for plausible deniability as it fought for Russian interests in Libya.

Resentment towards French colonial legacies and French troops' ineffectiveness at rooting out Islamist insurgencies (as well as anti-West sentiments more broadly) coupled with autocratic rulers seeking to cement their rule would prove fertile ground for Russian engagement in the Sahel through its proxy, the Wagner Group. In Libya, Wagner would provide Russia with the plausible deniability needed to subvert the UN-backed government in Tripoli as it sought to safeguard its economic interests. In Sudan, a request for Russian assistance resulted in the country becoming a staging ground for Wagner's information operations. In each of the countries that saw intervention by Wagner, its deployment was facilitated by informal networks and patronage characteristic of kleptocratic autocracies, similar to the kind from which it originated.

Political-Military Ecosystems

To date, the African countries where Wagner has intervened either politically or militarily comprise the Central African Republic (CAR), Libya, Madagascar, Mali, Mozambique, and Sudan. The countries in which Wagner has managed to successfully gain a foothold are characterized by several key factors; political instability, prevalence of patronage politics, competition for political influence or control, and abundant natural resources (also characterized by competition for exploitation). In addition to these factors, two more criteria are needed: support from the host government, and assent from the Russian government to intervene.[9] In the case of Libya, where Wagner was not deployed to support a recognized government, its deployment was on the specific instructions of Moscow. Oftentimes, initial deployments and operations would receive seed funding from the Kremlin.[10] The services Wagner provided to its clients were primarily security-related, including personal protection detail, training local security forces, and engaging in military operations. Efforts to protect their clients from threats to their rule extended beyond providing personal security and routing out opponents, as they also included launching campaigns in the information space and intervening in elections. In addition, Wagner pursued commercial ventures in its client states, particularly in the mining sector where the group participated in resource capture.

Protection Arrangements

The core service Wagner provides to its clients is security, particularly in the form of training security forces and conducting military operations. In addition, the Wagner Group also provides protective services to its African clients, namely security detail for leaders and their inner circles. Private protection arrangements can be referred to as “roofs,” which became popular in Russia in the 1990s.[11] Sometimes, gangs made businesses “offers they couldn't refuse,” forcing business owners to pay for protection under threat of violence. Other businesses were driven to proactively employ PSCs to protect them from extortion.

There is no evidence to suggest that threats were made to Libya’s Khalifa Haftar, Sudan’s Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo “Hemedti,” or CAR’s Faustin-Archange Touadéra if they chose not to employ Prigozhin’s men. However, their employment of Wagner to provide personal protection mirrors the use of more traditional PSCs in Russia, the main difference being that such services are being paid for by political leaders rather than corporate entities. The training of security forces and conducting of counterinsurgency operations by Wagner can also be referred to as roofs, as their chief goal is to protect their client. A Russian PMC providing roofs abroad demonstrates the interlinkages of private markets for violence. Personal protection, training security forces, and conducting counterinsurgency operations point to Wagner playing roles in the security and political ecosystems of the countries in which it operates. On each occasion, the roles are shaped to the particular circumstances of the country, and its relationship with Russia.

Central African Republic

The Central African Republic's fractured political landscape, weak rule of law, and competing militia groups created an environment conducive to Wagner's intervention.[12] At the time of Wagner's intervention in CAR, the country was in the midst of a civil war in which the central government lacked control of much of its territory. Russia's engagement with CAR was precipitated by the withdrawal of French forces in 2016 which left the country's central government in search of alternate security partners. The UN Multi-dimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the CAR (MINUSCA) was not mandated or willing to provide the kind of regime protection that President Faustin-Archange Touadéra sought.

Highlighting the informal nature of these arrangements and interlinkages of regional political marketplaces, the idea of Wagner entering CAR came about as a result of Wagner associate Mikhail Potepkin being approached by a Sudanese official asking whether Wagner would consider providing services to Touadéra, similar to the relationship they were building with President Omar al-Bashir.[13] In November 2017, Touadéra formally requested that Russia provide it with military trainers and weapons, following several months of meetings between senior Wagner Group leaders and CAR elites, including a meeting in August between CAR's ambassador to Russia and Prigozhin.[14]

To facilitate Wagner's entry into CAR, the Russian state leveraged its diplomatic influence on the UN Security Council to remove an arms embargo thereby allowing the necessary armaments to reach Bangui along with Wagner forces. Wagner fighters would be tasked with training local security forces, providing personal protection detail to President Touadéra and other high-ranking elites, and conducting military operations against suspected rebels both independently and in conjunction with CAR forces.[15]

The use of foreign troops to protect leaders is not new to CAR. Chadian soldiers formed a significant part of former President Bozizé's personal security and Presidential Guard.[16] CAR armed forces also reportedly fought alongside Chadian regular forces against Chadian armed groups in the country.[17] Additionally, Rwandan troops deployed as part of MINUSCA provided security detail to President Touadéra prior to being replaced by Wagner forces.[18] The deployment of Russian mercenaries to provide security services to CAR's leaders therefore added to a list of foreign security providers.

In efforts to cement Touadéra's rule, Wagner also engaged in peacemaking by playing a pivotal role in the Khartoum Agreement between the CAR government and rebels. By leveraging its financial and security incentives, Wagner was able to establish itself as the "sole linchpin" for safeguarding the central government's security.[19] In exchange for its services, Wagner was provided with mining concessions, including extractive rights to the Ndassima mine, the country's only industrialized gold mine.[20] Wagner's primary motivation for initiating peace talks was reportedly to gain access to diamond and gold mines in CAR's central and north-eastern regions under rebel control.[21]

Despite being contracted by Bangui, Wagner forged relations with numerous armed groups in the country as the group sought to expand its presence. Militia leaders were paid off in exchange for Wagner being granted permission to construct bases on their territory.[22] These contacts proved vital to Wagner's efforts to bring CAR's warring factions to the negotiating table. The peace talks were held in Khartoum and supported by Sudan and the UAE. As characteristic of political marketplaces, militia leaders were rewarded with financial incentives and promised leadership positions in the CAR government. Payments to militia leaders by Prigozhin ranged from $60,000–$500,000 USD.[23] From the deal, Wagner obtained free movement throughout rebel territory and permission to explore mining sites, with additional payments made to groups controlling the most important sites.[24] However, dissatisfaction with the agreement's implementation and former president François Bozizé's return from exile led to the agreement breaking down and a return to fighting, resulting in Wagner being thrust into a direct combat role to protect Touadéra's government.

One of the factors that led to Wagner's successes in CAR was, ironically, the very lack of Russian state presence.[25] This provided Wagner with the freedom to act as the Russian state, enabling it to engage in conflict mediation and peacemaking, pursuing commercial ventures, and providing protection services, without interference. Moreover, CAR became a place where Wagner could advertise its capacities to Russia, thereby gaining Kremlin trust and support for other Africa ventures.

Libya

Despite high hopes that the overthrow of Qadhafi would usher in a new era of democracy, human rights, and prosperity for Libyans, it instead was followed by terrorism, violence, criminality, civil conflict, foreign intervention, and the failure of the Libyan state to provide for its citizens.[26] According to Jason Pack, part of these woes originated from the country's dire economic situation in the late Qadhafi years, which he characterizes as comprised of "the worst features of both classic rentier petrostates … and ideological autarkic regimes."[27] These problems were exacerbated by complex privatising and oversight mechanisms of the kind introduced by Western consultants to post-socialist economies in order to improve accountability and transparency and facilitate pro-market orientation.[28]

However, as experienced in Russia, these factors instead allowed for the emergence of a new class of oligarchs through "crony privatization of state assets at fire sale prices," in addition to ineffective and inefficient regulations.[29] Rather than reforming or overhauling the system, successive governing bodies in Libya following Qadhafi's downfall instead sought to appease the country's population by increasing subsidies on consumer goods, placing militias on the government payroll, doubling public salaries, and creating new semi-independent institutions to dispense billions of dollars "in an attempt to purchase loyalty of the most potentially disruptive segments of the population."[30] Crucially, there also existed a general consensus among the Libyan authorities and populace that corrupt Qadhafi-era contracts with former allies abroad should not be honoured.

The combination of weak and dysfunctional institutions, simmering regional grievances, and issues around disarming and reintegrating militias into civilian life or a national security force created an ideal environment for foreign powers to intervene and back "winners" and "losers" according to their own economic, political, and security agendas.[31] Politicians and warlords who refused to compromise were rewarded by their respective foreign patrons.[32]

Wagner's deployment was largely directed by the Russian state, which saw in renegade General Khalifa Haftar its best chance to gain political influence in Libya. By supporting Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA), Russia hoped to gain access to Libya's port infrastructure for a future naval base, solidify its security cooperation with Egypt and Algeria, and expand its diplomatic influence in Libya.[33] Russia also had good reason to foment enduring disorder in Libya, as it stymied foreign competitors and demonstrated to its opponents the repercussions of an authoritarian regime not being maintained.[34] Wagner would play a major role in assisting the Tobruk-based government's attempts to overthrow and replace the UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli.

To enable Haftar and prominent Libyan politician and jurist Aquila Saleh Issa to fund a massive patronage network thereby allowing Haftar and his allies to consolidate control of eastern Libya, Russia provided 14.5 billion counterfeit Libyan dinars through a branch of the Libyan Central Bank in Tobruk.[35] By 2020, nearly 2,000 Wagner fighters had deployed to Libya to assist Haftar's efforts to seize the capital, Tripoli.[36] Wagner fighters would prove important assets in ground attacks as their snipers targeted front-line soldiers defending against Haftar's advance.[37] Wagner's intervention in Libya was also marked by close coordination with the UAE, which together with Egypt sought to combat political Islam in Libya which they viewed as threats to their own rule at home. Taking advantage of the UAE's "opaque" aviation market, Wagner shared an airbridge with the UAE, and the Emirati air force coordinated with Wagner units on the ground in carrying out airstrikes.[38] Reportedly, Wagner's operations were funded through Emirati shell companies.[39]

While Wagner forces fought alongside the LNA on the ground and provided the Russian state with plausible deniability as to its direct involvement, Russian diplomats were busy at the UN blocking resolutions calling for a halt to Haftar's offensive and a UN investigation into LNA war crimes.[40] Despite its support for Haftar's forces, Russia maintained open communication channels with the GNA in order to hedge its bets and position itself as a mediator as it doubted Haftar's ability to capture and control Tripoli.[41] A similar policy would also be seen in Sudan as Russia sought to hedge its bets between the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and Rapid Support Forces (RSF) amid the country's civil war.

The LNA employed and worked with numerous armed groups from across the region, including Front for Change and Concord in Chad (FACT) rebels and Sudan's RSF. This brought Wagner into closer contact with these groups, allowing it to expand its network in the region. Wagner shared a military base with FACT in Jufra,[42] and trained FACT rebels in Libya as a result of a non-aggression pact between FACT and Haftar.[43] Wagner's training of FACT rebels for combat in Libya and provision of weapons to the group fuelled speculation that Wagner was supporting the group's efforts to overthrow Chad's president, Idriss Déby.

Sudan

The patronage politics of former Sudanese President al-Bashir and the sprawling tentacles of Sudan's military-commercial complex provided a conduit for Prigozhin to expand Wagner's business ventures, while al-Bashir's need for a reliable security partner enabled Prigozhin to gain further favour with the Kremlin. Wagner's deployment to Sudan began after a meeting in 2017 between Prigozhin, al-Bashir, and energy minister Awad al-Jaz, in which al-Bashir requested political advisors and military instructors to train his security forces. While the exact details of how this meeting was facilitated are unknown, it is likely that the Russian state had a hand in it, especially given its strategic interests in Sudan.

Chief among Russia's strategic interests in Sudan is gaining a naval base on the Red Sea, which the Kremlin sees as crucial for safeguarding its oil exports, projecting power in the Red Sea, Eastern Mediterranean and Indian Ocean, challenging US hegemony over rules of navigation in the Red Sea, and competing with Turkey.[44] For Prigozhin, lobbying on behalf of Russian state interests allowed him to gain favour with Moscow, while expanding Wagner's commercial enterprise. To facilitate its commercial arrangements, a Wagner subsidy called M-Invest was created with Andrei Mandel, a Prigozhin associate who previously ran a Prigozhin-linked company that managed construction contracts for the Russian military, as its owner and director.[45] M-Invest would forge close relations with business entities linked to both the SAF and the Dagalo family. According to correspondence between Sudan's Military Industrial Corporation and Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces Valery Gerasimov, M-Invest attempted to lobby on behalf of Moscow for access to Sudanese facilities for the Russian Navy.[46]

In 2016, Sudan severed ties with its established security partner, Iran, under pressure from Saudi Arabia and the UAE. This left al-Bashir in search of other allies to train Sudan's security forces and found a willing purveyor in Wagner. In exchange for training Sudanese security forces, Wagner would gain gold mining concessions.[47] Sudan's gold sector is characterized by competition and factionalism among political elites, military leaders, and financial players vying for control of the revenue streams the sector produces.[48] This fractured dynamic would provide an opening for Wagner to conduct business with RSF commander Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo 'Hemedti.' It is important to note that resource capture was not Wagner's main goal. Rather, entering Sudan's gold industry allowed the Wagner Group to gain minority interest in Hemedti-linked companies in order to secure a share of the profit.[49]

To manage Wagner's gold mining operations, Meroe Gold was created as a subsidiary of M-Invest. In a move that highlights the corruption of the Sudanese state, Meroe Gold was exempted from Sudanese law requiring that all foreign entities with mining exploration licenses sell 30% of the company's shares to the government and incorporate in Sudan.[50] Reportedly, the order to Sudan's Ministry of Minerals to provide the exemption came from al-Bashir himself.[51] Instead of selling its shares, the Sudanese government made an arrangement with Meroe to receive its dues through military-controlled arms company Sudan Master Technology (SMT).[52]

Capitalizing on divisions within Sudan's security services, Wagner also struck business arrangements with entities linked to Hemedti, including Esnaad Engineering, managed by Hemedti's brother, Hamdan Dagalo Mousa.[53] A contract with Sudanese military intelligence-controlled Aswar Multi-Activities provided the foundation for Meroe's business dealings with the Sudanese state and Dagalo family. This contract entailed Meroe paying Aswar an initial $200,000 USD fee and $100,000 USD per month to "facilitate security, immigration and import activities," with M-Invest also agreeing to pay the salaries of Aswar's staff, all related taxes, and a $500 USD bonus for each additional Russian staff Wagner brought to Sudan.[54]

In addition to its commercial ventures, the Wagner Group advised al-Bashir on how to suppress protests against his rule, effectively acting as "repression consultants,"[55] though their advice proved fruitless as a popular uprising brought down al-Bashir in April 2019. Social media was used to praise al-Bashir's regime and discredit protestors. Facebook in particular was used by Wagner to promote Russian assistance to Sudan, stoke anti-Western sentiment, and circulate Russian state news articles.[56] Wagner also launched a disinformation campaign in 2021 in support of the Sudanese military takeover.[57]

Following the outbreak of Sudan's civil war, a clandestine military alliance was formed between Prigozhin and Hemedti which would see the Wagner Group deliver weapons to the RSF via bases in Syria and Libya.[58] Weapons shipments also included surface-to-air missiles delivered from Wagner stockpiles in CAR.[59] Despite cooperation between Wagner and the RSF, the Russian government has sought to maintain links with both the RSF and SAF in order to hedge its bets to safeguard the prospects for its coveted naval base. Since Prigozhin's death and the outbreak in fighting in 2023, Wagner's presence in Sudan has wound down making the extent of its current operations there unclear.

Mali

After gaining independence, Mali maintained close ties with its former colonial ruler. In order to maintain stability and its own influence, France became a staunch supporter of Mali's military regime following a coup in 1968. French financial support was crucial for enabling the Malian state to maintain its deficit spending and prevented it from experiencing a severe currency crisis and economic collapse.[60] France's emphasis on maintaining stability at the expense of accountable state building solidified the Malian junta's rule while simultaneously increasing its reliance on France, which also had the side effect of undermining the regime's legitimacy. As Gazeley states, "this led to a vicious cycle of state weakness where the state became more dependent on its foreign allies and coercive force to survive, which further undermined its legitimacy, requiring greater input from foreign allies and the military to shore it up."[61]

France launched a military intervention in January 2013 after military defeats by a Tuareg rebellion and Islamist armed groups led to fears of state collapse.[62] While the intervention was successful in recapturing all major population centres,[63] the ensuing counterterrorism mission was not. France's focus on eliminating armed groups through offensive counterterrorism operations proved ineffective at providing security for Mali's civilian population. The inability of France to provide security for Malians in addition to its use of high-casualty airstrikes[64] led to increased distrust and criticism from the population. Additionally, as per Bertrand et al., "the French deployment of force was increasingly seen, not as protecting Malian sovereignty, but as facilitating a form of 'internationalized government', in which local political elites were complicit and which many Malians experienced 'as a humiliation and violation of the country's sovereignty'."[65]

Distrust and anger over France's military conduct and support for corrupt elites was compounded by conspiracy theories of French sympathies for the Tuareg, which had their origins in French colonial rule due to the privileged position the Tuareg occupied.[66] Reportedly, suspicions of French duplicity were shared by Mali's military elite.[67] Relations between France and Bamako were further strained following a coup by Colonel Assimi Goïta in 2021. The new junta was quick to capitalize off anti-French sentiment as a means of solidifying its legitimacy.[68] France's unwillingness to recognize Mali's new government created an opening for another foreign power.

While France condemned the coup, Russia sought to leverage its diplomatic and military ties to strengthen its relations with the junta. Russia's Ambassador Igor Gromyko was one of the first foreign diplomats to meet Mali's new leaders, and the Russian government quickly affirmed its support for the Malian military. Moreover, Mali enjoyed longstanding military ties with Russia owing to Russia stationing a small group of military advisors in Bamako who forged relations with Mali's officer corps, with Malian officers including Minister of Defence, Colonel Sadio Camara, having received training in Russia.[69]

The junta's decision to eschew partnership with France in favour of Russia was due to two main reasons. The first being that the junta viewed Russia as a more ready partner to combat jihadist groups by deploying combat forces and military equipment on the ground. The second being that Mali's new leaders sought to garner more public support having seized power by force rather than by popular vote.[70] Frustration with France's interventions and colonial legacy meant that ditching France was a move popular with a large swath of Mali's population.

The Russian foreign and defence ministries were particularly pro-active in pushing for intervention, to the point where "Prigozhin and his team were unaware of the initial work that went into facilitating their arrival."[71] The Russian Ministry of Defence and Wagner Group came to an agreement in which the former would oversee strategy and coordinate Wagner forces on the ground with the Malian military while the latter would be responsible for providing personnel and managing logistics. For its services, Wagner was allegedly paid $10 million per month by the Goïta regime.[72]

However, while the Wagner Group had been able to partake in resource capture in CAR and Sudan, efforts to enter Mali's mining industry proved more difficult owing to the established presence of large foreign mining companies upon which the junta is highly reliant for tax revenue. According to the authors of *Blood Gold Report*, mining companies contributed more than 50% of all tax revenues to the Malian state in 2022, with Canada's Barrick Gold Corporation being the country's single largest tax contributor.[73] As a result, Wagner's roof was paid directly by the Malian junta rather than through commercial concessions.

Mali's continued partnership with the Wagner Group despite it having achieved little battlefield success, may give credence to comments made by French President Emmanuel Macron stating that the junta chose to partner with Wagner over France because it wanted a partner to "help protect its power, not fight against terrorism."[74] Mali's security partnership with Russia via the Wagner Group fits a pattern of Malian governments seeking external support for their own survival.

Where Wagner Failed

There is no specific formula for Wagner's African ventures. Each case has its own particularities in terms of local conditions and the nature of Russian state interest and, accordingly, the level of direction from Moscow. What all have in common is an opportunistic identification and exploitation of niches that provide financial profit and political returns. Despite the varying degrees of success it enjoyed in the CAR, Libya, Mali, and Sudan, Wagner's market entry strategies have failed spectacularly in other theatres, most notably Madagascar and Mozambique.

Madagascar and Mozambique's situations prior to Wagner's interventions had little in common. The former saw Wagner deployed to assist the incumbent president as political consultants while in the latter, Wagner was tasked with helping put down an Islamist insurgency. In neither case was Moscow invested in the country as a strategic client—though it might have changed its position had events unfolded differently.

Madagascar

Madagascar's president Hery Rajaonarimampianina formally requested Prigozhin's assistance for his re-election campaign at an investment forum in Moscow in March 2018. A team of up to 20 political consultants were dispatched to Madagascar a month later.[75] Their role was political, not military, though it is always possible that they provided secret security advisory. In addition to working on Rajaonarimampianina's campaign, Wagner appeared to throw its support behind some of his rivals, either as part of a strategy to diversify in case of its client's defeat,[75] or to control the electoral field by promoting spoiler candidates.[77] Despite the Wagner Group's efforts, rival Andry Rajoelina was victorious.[78]

Wagner's efforts in Madagascar were stymied by the country's competitive elections, a characteristic non-existent in any of the countries where Wagner's interventions were successful. Madagascar was also bereft of a major security threat that would have made its specialized protective services attractive to the government. The Group's efforts to gain a foothold in the country's mining sector also appear to have stalled. In short, the Madagascar operation appears to have been exploratory, and as soon as market conditions were unfavourable, Wagner withdrew.

Mozambique

Wagner's deployment to Mozambique in 2019 was initially to provide personal protection detail to President Filipe Nyusi.[79] However, Prigozhin saw an opening with the Islamist insurgency the Mozambican military was combatting in the country's northern Cabo Delgado province, especially in light of recent discoveries of natural gas fields off the coast.[80] However, Wagner proved ill-prepared to fight a counter-insurgency in Mozambique and withdrew from the country within months of deploying after suffering casualties.

Apart from facing an unexpectedly difficult opponent, there were several other reasons for Wagner's failure in Mozambique. While the Wagner Group's timing of deployment shortly after a meeting between Nyusi and President Vladimir Putin in Moscow indicates support from the highest levels of the Kremlin, Wagner lacked support from Russia's Ministry of Defence.[81] Reportedly, the group also faced suspicions from Mozambique's security elites.[82] As in Mali, the dominance of foreign companies in Mozambique's mining and energy sectors precluded Wagner's resource capture there. The group also faced stiff competition from South African PMCs who enjoyed stronger relations with Mozambique's military and intelligence services and had greater knowledge of the country and enemy they were tasked with fighting.[83]

While Wagner's failed efforts to keep Madagascar's Rajaonarimampianina in power may be compared to their inability to save Sudan's al-Bashir, Wagner was able to maintain a foothold in Sudan by forging close relations with different elements of the country's fractured security apparatus, ensuring its presence was not dependent on any one ruler. Madagascar did not provide the same conditions. In the CAR, Libya and Mali, Wagner enjoyed support and at times close cooperation with Russia's foreign and defence ministries and was effective at forging and maintaining relations with local political and security elites. The absence of tangible Russian state support and suspicion by Mozambican security elites who favoured their African partners denied Wagner the opportunity to gain a foothold in the country's market for violence. Moreover, the presence of sophisticated foreign competition denied Wagner opportunities to capture resources in both countries.

Conclusion

What does the history (thus far) of the Wagner Group tell us about the market in violence in Africa, and about Russian-African relations?

Russia and the African states where Wagner has operated have a shared historical experience: the state monopoly on violence was, at some point, dismantled. This occurred either through fiscal crisis, so that state budgetary capacity did not match the costs of its existing military system, or through civil war, or both. In this situation the rulers sought to sustain and reassert military power by the most accessible and efficient means available, namely private military companies that can operate without calling on state finance. How this then developed depended on the market in violence—regulation, supply and demand sides.

Privatized violence in Russia came under state control in the early 2000s, when Putin tamed the oligarchs with a judicious combination of threat and incentives. The deal was that they could keep their shadily-acquired fortunes but had to play by Putin's rules, or face his wrath. It worked. Since then, PSCs and Wagner have operated at the Kremlin's pleasure. Previous episodes of large-scale privatized violence in Africa have ended when states (colonial or post-colonial) have acquired the capacity, and political incentive, to monopolize control over violence within state structures.[84] Few states have been able to achieve this in the last 30 years, and insofar as they do so in the future, it unlikely to be either rapid or complete. Current prospects for centralized state building including establishing strong professional militaries appear to be weak. Absent the power to monopolize the market in violence, privatized violence will continue. The challenge for rulers is how to intervene in the market.

The supply of commercial violence in Russia and Africa originates in similar circumstances. The immediate context of the initial growth of PMCs in Russia was the oversupply of men formerly employed in the armed services along with violent entrepreneurs seeking to capitalize on a newly free market lacking sufficient legal protections. This is not dissimilar to the contemporaneous context in Africa, including South Africa, that led to the establishment of Executive Outcomes and various militias and paramilitaries. The supply of fighters has been sustained due to the availability of military labour in prisons in Russia, as seen with Wagner's recruitment for the Ukraine war, and among underemployed youth in Africa. Supply also creates demand because there are no military solutions to Africa's political problems and PMCs generate further grievance and counter-mobilization.

Since Prigozhin's 2023 mutiny, Russia has brought Wagner under tighter control and established a parallel Africa Corps under direct command of the Ministry of Defence.

In Libya, Africa Corps has absorbed Wagner operations by requiring Wagner fighters to sign contracts with the new agency or seek work elsewhere.[85] In CAR and Mali, Wagner fighters continue to operate under their own flag, albeit with greater scrutiny and oversight. Already, Africa Corps seems to have established a niche for itself, providing a more attractive alternative to the Wagner Group for African leaders seeking a more formal partnership with Russia and wary of the Group's conduct and resource capture. Suspicious of Wagner, the leader of Burkina Faso's junta, Ibrahim Traoré, eschewed the Group's services yet has welcomed Africa Corps military instructors with open arms.[86]

In Africa, Wagner provides certain specialized services that local PMCs or paramilitaries struggle to provide. Most importantly, African leaders may calculate that it is less likely that a foreign PMC will stage a coup than a comparably equipped national one. Even though the supply of African guns-for-hire is large and the going rate is low, the political risks entailed with contracting them is substantial.

The demand for private security/military operations initially arose in Russia and in Africa for similar reasons, namely the decline in state capacity to provide a monopoly on violence, and the emergence or persistence of insurgency, armed lawlessness and ungoverned territories. In Russia, that demand has since become limited to the active warzone of Ukraine, with Wagner filling a niche. In Africa, demand from governments for external security providers continued, with the features that (a) western official providers came with many strings attached, (b) western PMCs are expensive and also often attracted unwelcome media scrutiny, and (c) developing strong local PMCs came with obvious dangers, as dramatically illustrated by the RSF attempted putsch and subsequent civil war. Subsequently, Wagner offered a particular niche in security provision in African violent political markets and is likely to continue to do so.

Russia understands the context of its engagement in Africa, not only from its experience on the continent, but also because of the similarities between its recent history with a violent political market, and contemporary Africa. In this context, Russian operatives have a strong intuitive sense of the capacities and limitations of Wagner and its own Africa Corps and will not succumb to some of the illusions that have doomed western military interventions. As with African governments subcontracting security to militias, Wagner provides a form of security projection on the cheap, suited to limited objectives in perennially unstable countries. Russia has embedded itself in Africa's markets in violence. Wagner and its ilk are unlikely to disappear any time soon.

Endnotes

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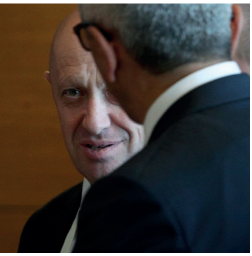

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