

From Popasna to Bakhmut. The Wagner Group in the Russia-Ukraine War

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The Russian mercenary organisation known as the Wagner Group was not engaged in the fighting in Ukraine until April 2022, when it turned out that the regular army was unable to break through their opponents' defences in the Donbas. In May and June, the mercenaries became the 'assault engine' of the offensive: they played a key role in capturing Popasna and entering the outskirts of Bakhmut. In the summer, Vladimir Putin decided to turn the Wagner Group into a separate unit operating as part of the Russian troops in Ukraine. Yevgeny Prigozhin, a businessman and criminal who manages this structure on behalf of the Kremlin, was given a large dose of independence and permission to recruit prisoners *en masse*. Despite recruiting tens of thousands of criminals into the ranks and receiving comprehensive logistical and material support from the resources of the regular army, the Wagner Group has still failed to capture Bakhmut. However, they have managed to tie down significant enemy forces in this part of the Donbas, and thus prevented their engagement in the offensives near Kherson and in Kharkiv and Luhansk oblasts. The Wagner Group's autumn offensives largely contributed to stabilising the front in what was a critical period for the invaders. It seems that this formation's combat value and importance as part of the troops engaged in Ukraine will gradually decrease, due to the huge losses suffered by Prigozhin's mercenaries in the battles of Bakhmut and the exhaustion of the current recruitment model.¹

From its creation to its engagement in the war in Ukraine, the Wagner Group has been closely linked to the Russian Armed Forces' foreign operations. The organisation was established to support regular Russian troops in Syria. However, the precise relationship between it and the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation is difficult to define, characterised as it is by a constant intertwining of coordinated moves and a multi-level cooperation beset by tension and open conflicts. On the one hand, the army has provided the Wagner Group with equipment and supplies, while at the same time attempting to exploit this material dependency to maintain maximum control over the group.

¹ This commentary focuses on discussing the military aspects of the Wagner Group's participation in the Russia-Ukraine war; first of all, the organisational changes in this structure, its military activity and its place within the Russian troops in Ukraine. Yevgeny Prigozhin's political activity, his connections with the Kremlin and the mercenaries' activity in Africa during the Ukraine war are not discussed in this text.

On the other hand, Prigozhin and his subordinates have made efforts to win as much autonomy as possible. This fragile balance still holds, and it will continue until the Kremlin withdraws its support for Prigozhin or decides to completely quit hiring mercenaries for military operations. It should also be emphasised that even though the Wagner Group is branded as a ‘private military company’, this has never been the correct definition at any stage of its activity. It is a *de facto* governmental mercenary formation, controlled by the Russian state’s secret services, which performs combat tasks typical of regular army units. Nothing of the kind has been seen in the recent history of armed conflicts.²

The Wagner Group’s strength, deployment and combat value before 24 February 2022

The history of the Wagner Group dates back to the Donbas war in 2014–5, when several independent combat groups were formed from loose mercenary units, each of strengths up to that of a light infantry company. It is not exactly known how they were created. They were generally supervised by the secret services, and the Russian army provided them with its training centres and weapons. These units were used primarily as sabotage and reconnaissance groups, but they did not play a major role in this phase of the aggression in the Donbas. One group commanded by a former Spetsnaz officer, Dmitry Utkin, who used the call-sign Wagner, distinguished itself among the other units.

It was only in the second half of 2015 that a larger group of ‘Wagner’ men was formed. At that time, the Kremlin decided to use a unit

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which had fought in Syria; this group would not use the Russian flag, but would fight as part of the Russian military contingent and be strictly controlled by the Russian security services. This was mainly dictated by the desire to cover up the number of dead and wounded regular troops. Government propaganda intended to use the intervention in Syria to show the world and its own citizens the power of the Russian army, while in fact the riskiest tasks were entrusted to the mercenaries.³ The Kremlin tasked Yevgeny Prigozhin with general supervision over the formation of the unit, and appointed Utkin as its commander. In 2015 and 2016, hundreds of Wagner Group mercenaries were engaged in fighting against Islamic militants. Initially, they formed one combat group with the strength of a light infantry battalion. The experiment was successful and in 2017 the group was expanded to four, and then six such groups, totalling about 2000 soldiers.⁴ The mercenaries were most active in Syria at the turn of 2018, but starting from the spring of that year, they were less and less involved in battle, and were gradually withdrawn to Russia. During this period, the Wagner Group became a well-coordinated and valuable light assault infantry grouping. However, it only had experience of fighting poorly armed opponents, and it was supported by the absolute firepower advantage of Russian artillery and aviation (the exception was the battle of Khasham in February 2018, in which the mercenary unit was defeated by American troops). It should be emphasised that, contrary to popular legends, the Wagner Group has never been a special forces unit composed of carefully selected soldiers. Most of its mercenaries did not differ from typical Russian men in terms of their education or physical condition.

² The definition of a private military company does apply, for example, to the Redut group, which for several years has been protecting industrial facilities in Syria for the Russian oligarch Gennady Timchenko and employs many former Wagner Group members. It should not be confused with the Redut mercenary unit currently fighting in Ukraine, which plays a minor role on the front.

³ According to official information, during the first three years of intervention in Syria, 112 Russian soldiers were killed, half of whom lost their lives in two plane crashes. The estimated death toll within the Wagner Group in this period reached about 400.

⁴ Интервью с экс-командиром НВФ “ЧВК Вагнера” и помощником Пригожина о Путине, войне и структуре “ЧВК”, Vladimir Osechkin’s interview with Marat Gabidullin, Гулагу-нет Официальный канал, 27 September 2022, youtube.com.

Prigozhin's position strengthened as a result of the 'private military company's successes in 2015–7. The Kremlin entrusted him with the supervision of new foreign operations. As their involvement in Syria declined, Wagner Group mercenaries began to appear in certain African countries. The Kremlin used them as its 'armed wing' in several operations aimed at supporting anti-democratic regimes, using them to further Russian interests and exploit local natural resources. In countries such as Libya, the Central African Republic and Mali, the formation has been used primarily for security (especially in Russian-controlled mines and industrial plants, and during Russian 'advisers' missions) and to train local armed formations. Their direct involvement in combat became sporadic, and they were more often used as pacification troops.⁵ It is estimated that at the beginning of 2022, the Wagner Group had several thousand experienced mercenaries in Africa serving in shifts (some were on duty, the rest were on rotation at home). In total, since 2015, at least ten thousand people may have passed through its ranks. During this period, a specific image of a mercenary developed in Russia: a man who is unyielding in battle, does not shy away from committing war crimes against the enemy, willingly uses Western equipment, and at the same time looks down on the regular army with its rigid structure and predictable mode of operation. The image of a 'soldier of fortune' who defends Russia's interests around the world was successfully promoted primarily by social media associated with Prigozhin.

Spring: breaking Ukraine's defences at Popasna

There are many indications that at the beginning of 2022, Prigozhin was outside Putin's immediate circle and was not privy to the plan of attack on Ukraine, and the Kremlin did not intend the Wagner Group to be used in the fighting.⁶ The situation rapidly changed in the first month of the war, when a significant part of the regular army units became unable to conduct offensive operations due to high personnel and equipment losses, as well as professional soldiers terminating their contracts. After withdrawing from Kyiv, Chernihiv and Sumy, the Russian command decided to change its conduct of the 'special operation' and replace deep manoeuvres of mechanised columns combined with airborne assaults with infantry attacks along narrow sections of the front supported by artillery barrages. In this situation, they started to bring uninvolved military units to Ukraine, and in view of the lack of valuable assault troops, it was decided that the army would also use Prigozhin's mercenaries.

In March, Wagner Group structures launched a recruitment campaign directed primarily at former members, with the formal requirements being significantly lowered. For example,

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those mercenaries who had been kicked out of the group for insubordination, drunkenness or drug use were allowed to rejoin.⁷ It seems that Prigozhin originally did not intend to send experienced mercenaries who had valid contracts for service in Africa to Ukraine, but under pressure from the Kremlin he changed his plans, and some of them ended up in the Donbas.⁸ At the turn of April, troops consisting of several hundred soldiers were deployed and then directed to the area near Popasna, where Ukrainian positions were well-fortified.

From the beginning, the Wagner Group mercenaries had a privileged position and stood out from the regular army in terms of training and individual equipment (for example, they used drones efficiently

⁵ For more information on this issue see C. Faulkner, *Undermining Democracy and Exploiting Clients: The Wagner Group's Nefarious Activities in Africa*, CTC Sentinel, book 6, volume 15, June 2022, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, ctc.westpoint.edu.

⁶ Л. Яппарова, 'Грубо говоря, мы начали войну. Как отправка ЧВК Вагнера на фронт помогла Пригожину наладить отношения с Путиным — и что такое «собянинский полк»', Медуза, 13 July 2022, meduza.io.

⁷ И. Барабанов, "'ЧВК Вагнера' начала широкий набор наемников на войну с Украиной. Берут всех', BBC News Русская служба, 11 March 2022, bbc.com/russian.

⁸ Update on Ukraine, Defence Intelligence, as in: tweet DefenceHQ, 28 March 2022, twitter.com.

and widely). The invaders' tactics ran along the following lines: the first attack was led by units composed of mobilised residents of the Donbas, who spotted Ukrainian firing points and minefields while incurring huge losses. The soldiers of the regular army attacked in the second wave, and the Wagner Group attacked the weakened defenders only as the third wave.⁹ In the first days of May, Popasna was captured, and a unit consisting of the Wagner Group and regular troops (the 76th Air Assault Division) managed to penetrate several kilometres into the Ukrainian lines. In mid-May, its leading elements reached the Bakhmut-Lysychansk road and the vicinity of Soledar, which could have resulted in the encirclement of the enemy troops defending the positions by the Donets.

Breaking the front in Luhansk oblast – although it was only a tactical success, and was achieved thanks to cooperation with other units – proved that the mercenaries were very skilled in fighting in urban terrain, especially against the backdrop of the regular army's spectacular defeats in the adjacent areas. At the same time, the Kremlin appreciated Prigozhin, awarding him the title of Hero of Russia, and an extensive media campaign promoting the Wagner Group was launched.¹⁰

Summer: the offensive continues, and prisoners are recruited on a mass scale

After Severodonetsk and Lysychansk were taken at the turn of July, the Russian advance in the Donbas slowed down, and the Ukrainians managed to stabilise their defences on the outskirts of Siversk and Bakhmut. The invading army then became disorganised, and was only able to continue offensive operations on a limited scale because it had huge superiority in artillery and could use artillery barrages. The main problem was the shortage of soldiers in the front-line infantry units, which fell to a critical level in the spring (battalions often only had about 50 combat-capable soldiers). Since the Kremlin feared to announce mobilisation at this stage and was aware of the inefficiency of the military draft boards, it decided to carry out a massive and decentralised recruitment of volunteers. As a result, the troops operating in Ukraine became a patchwork of several components over the summer. Its core was formed by the regular army (strengthened with new soldiers who had signed three- or six-month contracts) and two corps of the Donetsk and Luhansk 'people's militias'. Additionally, reserve battalions (BARS), Rosgvardiya, volunteer units formed under the aegis of the regional authorities and Prigozhin's mercenaries were deployed along some sections of the front.¹¹

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Its moves, although very slow, stood out from the unsuccessful assaults near Donetsk and the defeats on the Kherson and Kharkov fronts. At that time the Wagner Group consisted of only a few thousand soldiers (experienced mercenaries supplemented by new recruits), so it was unable to launch a full-scale offensive due to its limited staffing capacity. Prigozhin, who was earning increasing support from the Kremlin, was then given *carte blanche* to enlist volunteers at rates exceeding those offered by the military draft boards, and to recruit prisoners in great numbers. The recruitment started at the beginning of July. In September, it reached a massive scale and became a widely known phenomenon, partly as a result of the charismatic speeches made by Prigozhin, who personally toured penal camps. Prisoners were guaranteed pay, full amnesty after half a year of service and five million roubles in compensation

⁹ Ю. Бутусов, *Битва за Донбас почалась. Що відбувається на фронті?*, Бутусов Плюс, 20 April 2022, youtube.com. On 18 April, Yuri Butusov published first photographs of mercenaries killed in the Ukraine war. Some of them were Arabs, probably from Syria or Libya.

¹⁰ Л. Яппарова, 'Грубо говоря, мы начали войну...', *op. cit.*

¹¹ Ю. Бутусов, *Обіцянки наступу: коли та як Україна зможе розгромити російську армію?*, Бутусов Плюс, 20 August 2022, youtube.com. Apart from the Wagner Group, there were also other mercenary structures, such as the Redut unit (a Wagner Group equivalent controlled by the Ministry of Defence) and the Akhmat regiment formed in Chechnya. However, they did not play any major role in the fighting.

for their families in the event of death.¹² Some criteria regarding physical shape and health were applied in the first months. However, the kind of crime they had committed did not matter, so even murderers and rapists were accepted.¹³ By the end of October 2022 the Wagner Group gained at least 20,000 conscripts as a result of the recruitment in prisons, a figure which rose to as many as 50,000 by mid-January 2023.¹⁴ The criminals underwent an intensive two- or three-week training period at training grounds, covering the basic knowledge of infantry assault tactics. From the time they left prison, they were subject to strict discipline, and any signs of breaking it resulted in corporal punishment or even execution. The first group of these men was sent to the front in August, and throughout September and October they became the backbone of the Russian assault troops near Bakhmut and Soledar. Prigozhin planned for the Wagner Group to become an autonomous combat group, capable of breaking the enemy's defences near Bakhmut. Experienced mercenaries were nominated as commanders and operators of specialised equipment (such as drones). To minimise the losses among them, criminals were used on a massive scale on the front line. Prigozhin also gained access to army resources, including artillery and air support, as well as supplies of heavy infantry weapons and drones.

Autumn and winter: the attack on Soledar and Bakhmut

As the number of Wagner Group members increased over the autumn, it intensified its offensive operations in the Donbas and became the only Russian grouping to maintain the initiative.¹⁵ During the Ukrainian offensive in Kharkiv and Luhansk oblasts, and near Kherson, the Wagner Group tied down large forces of the Ukrainian army near Bakhmut, thus reducing its potential, especially in the then key direction of Svatove-Kreminna. This helped stabilise the front in the Luhansk oblast at the turn of October, before the first reinforcements arrived as a result of the mobilisation announced on 21 September.

Over this period, the formation changed its tactics, mainly as artillery ammunition in the Russian army began to run out, making the further use of barrage tactics

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impossible. The command of the Wagner Group treated the criminals as cannon fodder, so it adopted the tactic of continuous round-the-clock assaults of small infantry groups along specific sections of the front. Thus, armoured weapons and artillery ceased to be the basic elements of the invaders' offensive operations, in contrast to the earlier stages of the war. As a constant supply of prisoners was ensured, the commanders did not care about the huge death toll, especially since the command

¹² Ю. Красникова, 'ЧВК «Вагнера» вербует заключенных колоний Петербурга для поездки на Донбасс «идти в авангарде, помогать обнаруживать нацистов»', *Важные истории*, 4 July 2022, istories.media; Р. Гималова, 'Спасение осуждённого: как россиянка помешала ЧВК Вагнера завербовать своего мужа в колонии', *Вёрстка*, 17 August 2022, verstka.media.

¹³ Ivan Neparatov (34), who had stabbed one of his victims 88 times and was serving a 25-year sentence for five murders, was one of the most egregious 'record holders' among the prisoners recruited.

¹⁴ М. Литаврин, С. Голубев, 'За два месяца число заключенных в мужских колониях сократилось на рекордные 23 тысячи человек. Это происходит на фоне вербовки в «ЧВК Вагнера»', *Медиазона*, 18 November 2022, zona.media; '«Русь сидящая»: из 50 тысяч заключенных, завербованных ЧВК Вагнера, на фронте остались только 10 тысяч. Остальные либо погибли, либо дезертировали', *Медуза*, 23 January 2023, meduza.io.

¹⁵ The structure of the Russian command on the section of the front controlled by Wagner Group is unclear. At the time when the group was at its largest (November to January), it was up to 50 km long and covered the area from the northern suburbs of Horlivka (Zaitseve-Maiorsk) to the outskirts of the village of Berestove, located on the Bakhmut-Lysychansk road. In this section, the mercenaries were supported by subunits of the regular army (mainly artillery) and the 2nd Army Corps of the so-called Luhansk People's Republic. It seems that only former army officers were in command within the Wagner Group at the tactical level, until the point when the assaults on Soledar and Bakhmut were coordinated. Anton Yelizarov, a.k.a. Lotos, a former special forces officer who had been expelled from the army a few years previously for document forgery and who has been linked to the Wagner Group at least since 2016, was named by Prigozhin as the 'conqueror' of Soledar.

staff and operators of specialised weapons and drones were kept at the rear and spared.¹⁶ This tactic brought mediocre results and did not give Prigozhin the expected breakthrough. The Wagner Group's activity reached its peak in November, December and January, when it managed to capture Soledar and strengthen their positions in the southern and northern suburbs of Bakhmut. This pressure was so strong that the Ukrainians were forced to concentrate a large part of their best units in this area; that allowed the Russians to complete the mobilisation process and replenish the understaffed brigades and divisions of the regular army.

During the autumn and winter clashes at Bakhmut, the Wagner Group suffered huge losses. It is estimated that out of approximately 50,000 prisoners recruited

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in the second half of 2022, only about 10,000 continued their service at the end of January; the rest had been killed, wounded or deserted.¹⁷ Information about this and about the brutal treatment of the criminals by the old mercenaries leaked to the prisons, and the influx of new volunteers practically stopped during the winter. Since some of the Wagner assault troops had lost combat capability, units of the regular army began to appear on a larger scale near Bakhmut in mid-January; this was primarily the 106th Airborne Division, which consisted mainly of mobilised reservists. They took over the section of the front south of the town, and unsuccessfully attacked the village of Ivanivske and the road to Kostiantynivka. Nevertheless, the Ukrainian positions in Bakhmut itself were constantly attacked by mercenaries in February and March; they slowly displaced the defenders, reaching the western districts of the town in mid-April.

Prospects for the Wagner Group's further involvement in the Ukraine war

There is every indication that the Wagner Group cannot continue operating as it is used to. The prisons cannot continue to supply 'cannon fodder' *en masse* as before, nor can volunteers 'on the open market' be recruited at the previous high rates as part of the ongoing mobilisation. The Russian command does not need the support of mercenaries as it did in spring or summer, as it can now guarantee reinforcements for the fighting brigades and divisions at a much lower cost, through its own conscription structures. The situation is further aggravated by the conflicts in which Prigozhin was personally involved even before the war and which have only intensified in recent months. It seems that during the autumn he went all in and openly attacked some of the generals and the leadership of the Russian defence ministry, in hope of the quick capture of Bakhmut. However, he lost the battle for the Donbas, which will probably lead to a reduction in his influence and curb his business and political ambitions.

The future of the Wagner Group's core, who are experienced mercenaries, remains an open question. Their independence, high salaries, well-developed *esprit de corps* and the myth created by propaganda are difficult to stomach, both for many military officers and for part of the public, including the nationalist circles associated with Igor Girkin. However, it is unlikely that the Kremlin will let the defence ministry dissolve this structure completely, and so it is likely to continue to operate as a part of the Russian troops in Ukraine over the coming months.

¹⁶ Ю. Бутусов, 'Тактика "Вагнера": як досягають результатів зекі з тритижневою підготовкою та як їх б'ють?', Цензор.нет, 24 November 2022, censor.net.

¹⁷ '«Русь сидящая»...', *op. cit.* At the end of February the head of Ukrainian military intelligence, Kyrylo Budanov, also estimated that about 10,000 Wagner Group troops were directly involved in the fighting. Higher figures were given by the US administration: according to its estimates as of the end of January, the Wagner Group had around 50,000 people in Ukraine, including 10,000 actual mercenaries and 40,000 recruited criminals. At the end of March, these estimates fell to 6000 and 20,000–30,000 respectively. Apparently, the American data covered the entire group, including people who were not directly involved at the front (convalescents, training centres, supply units, etc.).