Kimberly Marten (2019) Russia’s use of semi-state security forces: the case of the Wagner Group, Post-Soviet Affairs, 35:3, 181-204, DOI: 10.1080/1060586X.2019.1591142

* What question is the author trying to answer?
  + Why is Russia using the Wagner group without “legalizing its existence or role?” (abs)
* What is the method, approach, or theory?
  + “This article provides a definitive, in-depth case-study, using primarily Russian sources, of Russia’s use of the informal “Wagner Group” private military company (PMC) and its antecedents (from 2012 to 2018) in Nigeria, Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, Syria, Sudan, and the Central African Republic” (abs)
* What is the main argument of the work?
  + “While Wagner is sometimes used in the same ways that other rational states use PMCs, corrupt informal networks tied to the Russian regime have also used it in ways that are not typical of other strong states and that potentially undermine Russian security interests” (abs)
  + More specifically:
    - She argues that Moscow uses PMCs in the same ways as a traditional state and as a way for Puting to make his “personal cronies” happy/wealthy (186)
* Article Outline
  + The challenge of defining Russian PMCs (183)
    - Distinguishing between PMCs and PSCs
      * “Some broader PSCs gather and analyze intelligence, act as bodyguards or guards at physical installations, or are contractors whoprovide food, housekeeping, andother goods and services to state military forces in the field” (183)
      * “PMCs are “expeditionary conflict entrepreneurs,” who “kill or train others to kill” in foreign settings (McFate 2014,1). This definition is similar to what Peter W. Singer earlier called “military provider firms,” thoseworking at the tactical level and “engaging in actual fighting, either as line units or specialists (for example, combat pilots) and/or direct command and control of field units” (Singer 2003,92).PMCs primarily hire military veterans, often those with a special-forces background. The Wagner Group is a “lethal expeditionary conflict entrepreneur” and a “military provider firm,” even though its members sometimes serve broader PSC functions (such as guarding) as well” (183)
    - Distinguishing between PMCs and mercenaries
      * “Mercenaries, he writes, are fly-by-night companies or soldiers of fortune who will work for anyone, while PMCs are concerned about maintaining and expanding their client base, and hence care about their reputation and try to avoid unsavory activity” (183)
    - Who are they fighting for?
      * “while Wagner’s leaders have contracted for profit and its members have fought for money, its members believed that they were simultaneously working on behalf of the Russian state (even though the identity of their actual employers has sometimes been murky)… They have been reliable providers of contract violence abroad, across years and across conflicts, for the Russian state, for Russia’s leading business interests, and for Russia’s allies. Yet Wagner’s relationship to state command and control has varied, inasmuch as sometimes they have clearly worked directly alongside regular Russian military forces, and other times not” (183)
  + PMCs and Russian law (184)
    - Skipping because it’s not relevant
  + Explanations for Russia’s use of legally unrecognized PMCs (186)
    - Broadly talking about Cossacks and why PMCs are not Cossacks
    - Russia as a rational state (186)
      * This just offers the basic info on state use of PMCs as rational, skimming mostly
      * “Key for Putin’s Russia, PMCs can also be used by states to maintain plausible deniability about their secret or disreputable involvement in foreign adventures. Semi-state security groups like Wagner are certainly a component of Putin’s current “information warfare” strategy, using obfuscation in their relationship with the state to sow confusion and chaos among Russia’s enemies. Wagner in particular may have been intentionally created by the GRU as part of its Putin-era unconventional warfare strategy (Bukkvoll and Østensen 2018)
      * Author does say that plausible deniability only partly explains Wagner use
        + Basically, the widespread reporting of Wagner has sort of debunked this, including Putin’s mention of Wagner in Dec. 2018
      * Constructivist views:
        + “Indeed from a constructivist theoretical political science perspective, legalization should have been a preference for the status-conscious Russian state. The actions of other permanent members of the UNSC in signing the Montreux Document demonstrate that legalization is an appropriate action for powerful states to take. Legalization would therefore help emphasize that Russia is a member of the great-power club (Finnemore 1996). In sum, while there are clear state-based interests for Russia to continue to deploy Wagner and groups like it, Moscow’s long-standing decision not to legalize PMCs remains a puzzle from the perspective of state interests” (188)
    - Corrupt informal networks (188)
      * Skimming this section for the same reason as previous
      * Main argument of the section:
        + “Putin’s rule is defined by informal personal network connections, rather than by bureaucratic rules and procedures. These relationships extend to the highest level of the Russian security and intelligence forces (Taylor 2007, 2011;Galeotti 2013, 2016;Marten 2019b). PMCs might provide muscle that is useful for the pursuit of individual profit” (188)
      * Loss of Russian Sovereignty
        + “If this explanation is correct, it implies that the integrity of Russian sovereignty may be gradually falling victim to wealthy patrons and their mercenaries, who use personal connections to flout state law and potentially embroil the Russian state in conflicts abroad. This would indicate that groups such as Wagner are actually undermining state rationality, by leaving the state hostage to private interests. If this is happening, then Russia might be on its way to employingPMCsaswhatAvanthastermedacorruptand authoritarian “weak state,” although she uses the label to refer to post-colonial states that never established firm civilian control over capable militaries” (188)
  + The challenge of finding high-quality information (189)
    - Russian Misinformation
      * Apparantely Russia has used multiple misinformation strategies to fabricate a PMC in Syria, and misdirect the public
    - Journalist’s reporting on Wagner
      * They have been DDoS'ed before and had a number of threats levied
  + The Wagner group: a case study (190)
    - This section is an in-depth history of the Wagner Group; reporting and research style feels very much like what a journalist would do
    - Prehistory (190)
      * “The Wagner Group had its roots in a firm known as Antiterror-Orel, based in southwestern Russia” (190)
      * “An entity known as the Moran Security Group apparently broke off of Antiterror-Orel” (190)
      * “This vignette demonstrates that the Russian state – in this case, its foreign ministry – was willing to go to bat for this PSC abroad and negotiate its employees’ release from prison, when it was engaged in work for state-owned Russian oil shipping interests” (190)
      * “Meanwhile, in the spring of 2013, the Moran Security Group began inviting Russian veterans to interview with a new company called Slavonic Corps, which was headquartered in Hong Kong instead of Russia” (191)
      * Slavonic Corps contracts with 267 men to work in Syria
        + “They had been told that their contracts were with the Syrian government, but with the implication that the FSB and the Russian government had approved them.” (191)
        + “There is probably more to the story than what is available from press reports, but the case demonstrates that the Russian state can at will prosecute PMCs as mercenaries” (191)
    - The Wagner group emerges (192)
      * Dmitrii Utkin emerges as the Slavonic Corps transitions into the Wagner Group
        + Member of GRU
        + Nicknamed Wagner because of his affinity for the Third Reich “aesthetics and ideology” (192)

Holy shit these guys are just generic action movie villians

* + - * “There is no evidence that this group was ever officially registered in Russia, or anywhere else, although an Israeli website that often reports on global intelligence rumors claims that Wagner is registered in Argentina” (192)
        + But this is unverified
      * More evidence in this section connecting Wagner to GRU and Russian military
    - The Wagner Group in practice: Debaltseve and Palmyra
      * First ever operation was in Crimea in 2014
      * “The infighting among rebel commanders in eastern Ukraine in 2015 was infamous, and at least in part appears to have been an effort by Moscow to retake control, including from local Ukrainian Cossacks who wanted independence from both Moscow and Kyiv (Kramer 2015). In other words, when Wagner first appeared on the scene, it may very well have been acting as a military enterpriser, playing a “plausible deniability” role for the Russian armed forces in eastern Ukraine while helping them establish a pro-Kremlin order” (192)
      * More evidence here linking Wagner to Russian military
      * “In June 2016 Korotkov broke the story about Wagner’s connection to Prigozhin, as noted above, who is believed to be Wagner’s primary funder”
      * “They believe that somewhere between 73 and 101 of Wagner’smen were killed in Syria. Wagner, in other words, was being used the way that PMCs are used by many powerful states”(193)
    - Deir-el-Zour (194) [Syrian city]
      * “Russian Energy Minister Aleksandr Novak revealed in a March 2017 interview that in December 2016, in Moscow, he facilitated the signing of a “serious Memorandum of Understanding” (MOU) between his Syrian counterpart and a newly registered Russian firm called Evro Polis” (194)
      * Feb. 7th, 2018
        + “A large group of Russian-speaking militia members crossed the internal deconfliction zone border in eastern Syria that had been agreed by US and Russian forces in 2015. When this militia began firing on a US-supported and Kurdish-controlled military base guarding a Conoco gas plant in Deir-el-Zour, US forces fought back. When the attack continued anyway, the US command called in a devastating series of airstrikes” (194)
        + Despite denying it, there is high confidence that the Kremlin knew this was Wagner group
      * “This event raises one of the greatest puzzles surrounding Wagner: why didn’t the Russian military command, which was in contact with the US command and hence presumably understood that the US was going to defend the location, contact the Wagner forces and tell them to abort the mission?” (195)
      * “The desire to maintain “plausible deniability” probably explains much of Russia’s actions in this case – as does the suspicion that Moscow wanted to test the mettle and endurance of the US presence in Syria by challenging it on the sly, using Wagner as a proxy… These arguments, however, cannot explain the extraordinary callousness that Russian military officers seem to have shown to the hundreds of Russian veterans in Wagner who had just been lauded by the Kremlin for working with them earlier in both Ukraine and Syria – including the failure to send in helicopters to remove casualties from the battlefield after the devastating American airstrikes” (195)
    - Prigozhin and Wagner in Africa (196)
      * Russia signs contract to prospect gold with Russian company called M-Invest, which is “probably a Prigozhin firm” (197)
      * “Russian personnel were also reported by Russian press sources (with photographic evidence) to be providing personal security for President Faustin-Archange Touadéra and his administration – and by local CAR and French press sources to be providing security for Prigozhin’s mines” (197)
      * “It is perhaps significant that the Russian ministry involved in this round of cooperation with Prigozhin and this apparent deployment of Wagner is the Foreign Ministry, not the Energy Ministry – a more standard instrument for military training and support deployments internationally – and that this time Wagner appears to be deployed alongside at least a few regular Russian officers” (197)
      * “In the video Prigozhin appears to be seated on the Russian side of a negotiating table, near Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu” (198)
  + Conclusions
    - Wagner and predecessor are unique because their actions are highly reported in many significant event in Russian dimplomacy and war
    - “What can we learn from the Wagner history, and what does this tell us about Russia’s motives in deploying PMCs abroad without legally recognizing them?” (198
      * “With time, though, plausible deniability became harder and harder to achieve, because journalists (both Russian and foreign) were able to obtain photos, documents, and interviews that told reliable stories of Wagner’s involvement abroad. Whatever use Wagner continues to be for the Russian state today, it would be difficult to argue that at this point plausible deniability is still a major reason for its deployment” (198)
      * Wagner is being used “to blur the distinction between state-supported military activities abroad, and the private use of force abroad by an oligarch with a criminal past who is connected to Putin.” (198)
      * Sovereignty implications?
        + “That kind of blurring has been frequently practiced by corrupt post-colonial regimes, but it is not expected of today’s great powers who have strong civilian control over their military forces”
        + ***Maybe we could make the case that Wagner and other are disrupting or hurting Russian sovereignty?***
        + “Taken together, these points suggest that it is the corrupt informal network explanation that provides a more complete understanding for Russia’s continuing use of groups like Wagner, and for its decision not to legalize PMCs as of yet. They also suggest that while at times Wagner may work on behalf of rational state interests, at times it also embroils the Russian state in both physical and reputational risks that a rational state might want to avoid” (199)
      * Difference between US and Russian use of PMCs:
        + “But that is different conceptually from what appears to have happened with Prigozhin and Wagner in Syria and Africa, where private command over the seizure or guarding of extraction concessions became intermixed with the command of military force, including in the African cases with Russian state training of foreign troops” (198)
      * Moscow changes its mind a lot about Wagner:
        + “When the operational group was legally recognized as a PSC helping Russian state commercial interests – namely, the case of Moran in Nigeria – the Russian state was happy to come to its assistance” (198)
        + Lots of other weird, contradictory actions happening
    - Why does Moscow keep PMCs illegal?
      * “Taken together, these points suggest that it is the corrupt informal network explanation that provides a more complete understanding for Russia’s continuing use of groups like Wagner, and for its decision not to legalize PMCs as of yet. They also suggest that while at times Wagner may work on behalf of rational state interests, at times it also embroils the Russian state in both physical and reputational risks that a rational state might want to avoid” (199)

(“Russia’s Use of Its Private Military Companies,” 2020)

This is just a strategic comments paper so taking brief notes

* Russian Misinformation in Africa
  + “These networks originated in Russia and have been attributed by Stanford University’s Cyber Policy Center to the Wagner Group, the country’s most prominent private military company (PMC), which has deployed its soldiers to conduct operations in each of the countries named. The fact that Wagner has been conducting information campaigns to support its operations on the ground is only the latest evidence that Russian PMCs – a relatively new phenomenon in the country’s foreign relations – are being deployed for more types of missions in a growing number of countries” (1)
* Difference between Russian and US PMCs
  + “Russian PMCs are not wholly independent entities run by professional managers at arms’ length from the government, as in the United Kingdom or United States. Rather, they deploy abroad to conduct missions including highintensity combat in pursuit of goals largely set by Moscow” (1)
  + “Russian PMCs, by contrast, often use their soldiers to project hard combat power. In Syria, they performed firesupport, special-operations and intelligencegathering missions, and trained Syrian fighters and proxies” (1)
* Putin’s comments
  + “Indeed, President Vladimir Putin once referred to PMCs as ‘a tool for the realisation of national interests without the direct participation of the state’”(1)
* Why use PMCs?
  + Cheaper, easier, and deniable
  + “Putin did not take public support for the Syria intervention for granted and invested significant time and energy promoting the effort as legitimate, time-limited, and focused on air- and combat-support missions with no role for ground operations. By offloading combat missions to Wagner and others, he could credibly appease domestic critics while also pursuing risky but potentially worthwhile missions on the ground… The response from the Russian public to PMC deaths has been apathetic.” (2)
* Emergence of Russian PMCs
  + “Russian PMCs were first used in 2014 when ‘little green men’ – Russian troops without insignia alongside private soldiers for hire – appeared in Crimea and then eastern Donbas to support Ukrainian separatist militias. This approach allowed Russia to deny its presence in Ukraine for long enough to capture the Crimean parliament and eventually annex the peninsula” (1)
* **Same example used in Marten (2019)**
  + “One of the Wagner Group’s training sites is adjacent to a GRU special-forces facility at Molkino, and its alleged owner, Yevgeny Prigozhin, is a long-time associate of Putin’s” (1)
  + “In February 2018, Wagner and pro-Assad forces attacked a small US outpost in Deir ez-Zor for reasons that remain unclear and were routed by air and artillery strikes as soon as the US – attempting to avoid sparking a larger conflict – determined that formal Russian soldiers were not participating in the attack” (2)
  + Libya
    - “By May 2020, up to 1,200 Russian PMC soldiers were present in Libya along with 2,000 militiamen Russia had recruited from Syria and transported across the Mediterranean (along with operational supply equipment from the war effort there). Those militiamen would fight other Syrians brought to Libya by Turkey” (2)
  + Prigozhin companies:
    - “The CAR has awarded exploration rights for gold and diamonds to other Prigozhin front companies” (2)
* Other Russian PMCs
  + “Other PMCs include the Vesna Group (a Wagner subsidiary); Evro Polis (charged with retaking Syrian oil fields from ISIS and protecting them); Patriot (also in Syria); and the RSB Group (contracted to remove landmines in Libya). While estimates are low confidence and vary, more than a dozen Russian PMCs are now operating globally with forces numbering in the tens of thousands” (1)
* More use of Wagner
  + “Moscow has also used Wagner to fund social initiatives, establish Russia-controlled media outlets and to persuade the government to block French arms sales to the country while facilitating those from Russia” (2)
* Conclusion
  + “Therefore, in the pessimistic – and most likely – scenario for US–Russia relations, the use of PMCs as Russian proxies will probably continue and perhaps expand” (2)

Pay attention to what they say is missing

Pay attention to overlapping examples of the same thing

Also anything linking Russia to Wagner