

Russia's Rogue Warriors: A Paramilitary Legacy

Description

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A rather puzzling and dramatic event gripped the world's attention amid an already tumultuous ongoing conflict in Ukraine as the prominent Russian private military company (PMC) Wagner Group and its leader enigmatic leader Yevgeny Prigozhin embarked on a major mutiny on June 23, 2023 that sparked international fears of a possible civil war in Russia. It is best to situate this event within a larger context that is sometimes neglected by scholars and analysts.

One element of the current situation of the war in Ukraine that is often overlooked is the activities of other lesser-known paramilitary and irregular forces by the Russians. Furthermore, there is a more long-term historical legacy of the so-called "wild 90s" that Russia experienced in the immediate post-Soviet period. In this period, a paramilitary culture of varying kinds thrived and helped lay the foundations for these irregular forces of the Russian war effort. This occurred as a result of two closely related processes: the disintegration of the official militarism of the Soviet state along with the rise of radical ultranationalism as an ideological alternative to Communist ideology. What is certain from a historical vantage point is that such groups do not arise out of nowhere, but rather do so when there is a vacuum of necessary military force.

Before the dust had settled on the Wagner Group mutiny, [scholars and analysts](#) were seeking to find suitable historical parallels to the recent events in Russia. The actions of the Wagner Group have also raised the issue of the reliability of Private Military Contractors (PMCs) and other irregular paramilitary forces around the world. The dangers of PMCs going rogue on their host states have long been a matter of debate among analysts and scholars. Even Niccolò Machiavelli in his [Art of War](#) (1520) warned against the use of mercenaries due to the uncertainty of their loyalty, declaring "War makes thieves, and peace hangs them."

Paramilitarism Defined

The theoretical questions over the exact nature of paramilitarism should be outlined to assist in better understanding the nature of the phenomenon under investigation in this study. Max Weber (1864-1920) famously argued in [“Politics as a Vocation”](#) that the state is the power that *“lays claim to the monopoly use of legitimate physical violence within a particular territory”*. This includes both the professional military as well as police and other security forces employed by the state. Thus, [paramilitary forces](#) are often defined as those that operated outside this monopoly, most often against the interests of the state.

However, the post-Cold War era has challenged this simplistic binary of military versus paramilitary, regular and irregular forces. Numerous case studies exist that seem to demonstrate the cooperation between regular and irregular forces for common purposes, even leading to debates among scholars regarding whether these represent fundamentally different forms of conflict commonly called [“New Wars”](#) or [“Hybrid Warfare”](#). Whilst Max Weber’s conceptual ideal made sense for the modern period (roughly defined as post-1789 era of European history), it is increasingly ill-suited for a world defined by a [neo-medieval nature](#) consisting of a fragmented geopolitical landscape, where the monopoly on violence is shared among a complex, interlocking array of state and non-state actors.

Ulfert argues that paramilitarism is often the [“outsourcing of violence by the state”](#). He also [marks it](#) as an “umbrella concept that covers a broad continuum, distinguished by levels of state involvement. At the left end of this spectrum, there are spontaneous, bottom-up initiatives such as local vigilantes, lynch mobs, and self-defense groups, and on the other end of the continuum stand the much more organized, top-down, professional paramilitary units of the state.” This seems to be the case for post-Soviet Russia, where the existence of state and non-state forces fighting in parallel to each other. A possible alternative argument to Max Weber is that the state maintains a *primary* claim, but not necessarily an exclusively monopolistic one. This conception would make far more sense in contexts where paramilitary forces exist in parallel to and sometimes connected to the state-funded militaries.

In spite of Max Weber’s conceptual ideal, the emergence of paramilitary cultures that stand outside official government control has been a recurring feature of modern societies over the past century or so. Ironically, one major historical case occurred within Max Weber’s own lifetime in his native Germany after the First World War (1914-1918). The German Reichswehr, the official military of the Weimar Republic, was restricted by the Treaty of Versailles to only 100,000 men. Given the postwar chaos engulfing the country, the Reichswehr faced mounting difficulties in maintaining order against revolutionary uprisings across the country. In this vacuum arose paramilitary units called Freikorps, made up of ex-soldiers with far-right sympathies, who fought alongside the official army to crush these uprisings. Eventually, the Freikorps participated in the 1920 Kapp Putsch, a failed *coup d’état*

attempt, and later on the Beer Hall Putsch of 1923 led by Adolf Hitler that also attempted to overthrow the official German government. Although the most famous example, the Freikorps, was not the only example of [paramilitary cultures to emerge in the immediate aftermath of World War I](#).

What is important to note in these cases is that the line between official *militarism* and *paramilitarism* can be far more blurred than is often imagined. Paramilitary cultures are often offshoots of official militarism and patriotic messaging. This was the case with the Freikorps of Germany, coming off from the long [Prussian and German traditions of glorifying the military](#). In parallel to Prussia, Russia long had its own tradition of glorifying military values in its society, and as in Germany, helped forge the foundations for the emergence of its own paramilitary culture.

The Deep Origins of Russian Paramilitarism: Tsarist and Soviet Militarism

The roots of Russia's paramilitary culture even precede the existence of the Soviet Union. Russia consistently has had a long history of social militarization of various ideological strains. The Czarist regime throughout the 19th century relied heavily upon military force as its foundational power base, which proved useful in quelling internal dissent, such as the Decembrist Revolt of 1823, as one example.

The victory of the Communists in the Russian Civil War (1917-1921) only further strengthened this foundation. The English historian Christopher Dawson (1889-1970) made a bold argument that the nature of the Soviet regime [was built on the legacy](#) of the "military police state" of the [Czarist regime](#) and an "unnatural union with the Western revolutionary tradition". Throughout its existence, [Soviet society was heavily militarized](#) based on the premise that it was a socialist fortress being besieged by a hostile capitalist world. The invasion of the Soviet Union during World War II and the high cost of lives further cemented the high social prestige of the Soviet military. Pre-military training for teens was a common element in the [Communist Komsomol](#) youth movement for the explicit purpose that "[t]he young generation of the Soviet Union must prepare themselves to defend their fatherland against any dangers and attacks on it by enemies."

Disintegration of Soviet Militarism

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Russian military establishment fell into a state of degradation. After previously having the largest military force in the world, suddenly, large numbers of veterans of the Soviet military were forced out of their careers. As a result, in this vacuum, the rise of the post-Soviet paramilitary culture was witnessed that still affects Russia to this day.

Then CIA Director R. James Woolsey famously described the post-Cold War era as one [characterized by](#) *“we have slain the dragon, but we live now in a jungle filled with a bewildering variety of poisonous snakes.”* The usual narrative presented is that the Soviet dragon was slain, but often forgotten is that many of the snakes were direct offspring of that same slain dragon. One prominent feature of this paramilitary culture was the rise of a private security industry within Russia that was populated by former veterans of the Soviet and Russian military. A parallel process witnessed the flourishing of Russian organized crime on the international stage, which also maintained links with ex-military and former personnel from the *Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti*, or Committee for State Security (KGB).

It should be noted, of course, that there are significant differences between Private Military Companies (PMCs), Private Security Companies, and mercenaries. The first two entities generally operate within at least a semi-legal framework, whilst mercenaries operate completely outside the bounds of legitimate legal armed forces. It is also clear from the Russian Constitution and Criminal Code actually forbids mercenaries. Contrary to the common [“Renegade Russian”](#) trope found in American pop culture of the 1990s, Russian private companies like Wagner actually arose as a response to the lucrative business model set by American Private Military Companies (PMCs) such as Blackwater and others in Iraq and elsewhere. As John Lechner [notes](#), *“Wagner’s rise was the symptom, not the cause”* of the overall context of the rise of private military forces that operated outside the formal structures of state-controlled military forces.

Rise of Radical Nationalist Paramilitary Groups

At the same time, around the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia was undergoing a strong ideological shift away from Marxist-Leninist Communism to varying forms of Russian nationalism. The spectrum of this nationalism ranged from the liberal nationalism of Boris Yeltsin to the hardline far-right that included Monarchists who sought a restoration of the Czar, to even Neo-Nazis. Among the more hardline far-right nationalists, a militant ethos that promoted the formation of political paramilitary groups was commonplace.

Among the first of these far-right paramilitary groups was Pamyat, formed in 1986 by Dmitri Vasilyev, with the intended agenda of a restoration of the Czar. In 1990, Alexander Barkashov founded the Russian National Unity (RNE) to pursue a more overt Neo-Nazi direction as opposed to Pamyat’s Neo-Monarchist one. Russian National Unity conducted its own paramilitary training activities, which it used during its participation in the 1993 Constitutional Crisis. The rise of far-right paramilitary culture in Russia has long been an issue of concern for analysts. One of the most prominent far-right forces today is the [Russian Imperial Legion](#), the paramilitary wing of the Russian Imperial Movement.

Stanislav Vorobyev founded the Legion in 2002, and one of its main activities is running the paramilitary training course “Partizan” out of St. Petersburg. This [paramilitary training has been sought by far-right extremists from around the world](#), which was a key reason it was designated a terrorist group by the U.S. State Department in April 2020. Not just content with paramilitary training, members have been known to have actually engaged in direct combat operations in Ukraine alongside [other far-right paramilitary groups](#) both in 2014 and currently.

The Impact on Russia and Our World

These are the two parallel and at times interrelated processes in post-Soviet Russia that have contributed to the rise of formidable Russian irregular forces. The disintegration and subsequent privatization of the once mighty Soviet military, and the rise of extremist nationalist ideological groups. One significant difference between the predecessors of the 1990s and current irregular Russian actors is that the latter are now able to forge temporary alliances with the Russian state and even help direct official Russian policy abroad.

Vladimir Putin, President of Russia, has had a very troublesome relationship with these radical paramilitary groups that operate outside his formal control. Many of the radical ultra-nationalists [view Putin with disgust](#) and dismiss the Russian Federation as an artificial artifact of the despised Soviet legacy, as opposed to the glorious Russian Empire of the Czars. Putin has had to officially suppress or abolish such groups when they posed a threat, but also sought to co-opt them to serve Russian geopolitical interests.

Returning to Woolsey’s metaphor of the snakes and dragons, the Russian dragon has arisen (even if smaller in stature than its Soviet predecessor), but it can also loosely coordinate with the smaller Russian snakes as well in a delicate Faustian bargain of temporary convenience. This has been witnessed in Ukraine, Syria, and more recently [Africa](#) as well. This delicate Faustian dance can prove costly in the long run, as snakes can still have a poisonous bite even if not lethal. The Wagner snake took that course of action in July of 2023, and it remains to be seen how the other paramilitary groups might fare.

Although we should not be complacent about the threat, it should not be confined to Russia. Much like its Western counterparts, Wagner and other paramilitary groups also operated in an often [complex dynamic](#) of being both parallel and opposed to such state structures at the same time. It is a truly transnational and global phenomenon.

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