

Wagner Group (Expeditionary and Volunteer Corps)

Name: Wagner Group (Expeditionary and Volunteer Corps)

Type of Organization:

- Non-state actor

Ideologies and Affiliations:

- Nationalist
- capitalist
- transnational criminal

Place of Origin:

Russia

Year of Origin:

2014

Founder(s):

Dmitry Utkin

Places of Operation:

Burkina Faso, Central African Republic (CAR), Libya, Mali, Sudan, Syria, Ukraine, Niger

Overview

Executive Summary:

The Wagner Group was a Russia-based private military company (PMC) comprised of a network of businesses and mercenary groups that operated across the globe. Wagner was founded in 2014 by Dmitry Utkin and was financially and publicly fronted by Yevgeny Prigozhin, a former close ally of Russian President Vladimir Putin.¹ Following the death of Prigozhin in August 2023, the Wagner Group was technically disbanded and replaced with the Russian state-backed Volunteer and Expeditionary Corps. However, media and government forces continue to use the name Wagner Group in less detailed references to the current incarnations of the military and business entity.

In November 2023, the Russian Ministry of Defense absorbed the Wagner Group and divided it into two organizations: a Ukraine-focused defense network called the Volunteer Corps and the Expeditionary Corps, which oversees the Kremlin's military deployments abroad. Within the Expeditionary Corps is the Africa Corps division, which specifically handles the former Wagner Group's operations throughout the African continent. The post-Wagner network maintains troops across Ukraine, [Libya](#), Sudan, Central African Republic (CAR), and [Mali](#). With the December 2023 creation of the Africa Corps, the Kremlin formally expanded its operations into [Burkina Faso](#) and [Niger](#) in early 2024.² In July 2023, Wagner boasted a recruited troop size of more than 50,000 in Ukraine alone.³ As of February 2024, an estimated 5,000 Wagner-Kremlin-affiliated troops are deployed across Africa.⁴

Upon its establishment, Wagner maintained close relationships with Russia's Chief Intelligence Office (*Glavnoye Razvedyvatelnoye Upravlenie* or GRU), Federal Security Service (*Federal'naya Sluzhba Bezopasnosti* or FSB), and Foreign Intelligence Service (*Sluzhba vneshney razvedki Rossiyskoy Federatsii* or SVR).⁵ Along with security services and paramilitary assistance, Wagner also launched disinformation campaigns for governments in exchange for resource concessions and diplomatic support.⁶

As a PMC, Wagner was hired by governments for security or combat services. However, their services were also used to suppress public dissent of various administrations. Wagner held a notoriously violent record, as its contract soldiers were known to carry out indiscriminate attacks regardless of the scale of military operations. The U.S. Department of the Treasury designated Wagner as a significant transnational criminal organization on

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May 25, 2023, for rampant crimes against humanity and criminal activity. Chief among those crimes were mass executions, rape, child abductions, and physical abuse, which regularly occurred throughout countries in which Wagner fighters were deployed.⁷ The European Union added the Wagner Group to its sanctions list in April 2023.⁸

Wagner was first involved in the Russia-Ukraine conflict in 2014, when Russia illegally annexed the Crimean Peninsula and sponsored a revolt in eastern Ukraine.⁹ Following Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Wagner was once again brought into the fold and played a pivotal role in helping the Kremlin, after a months-long battle, secure control of the Ukrainian town of Bakhmut. That operation alone killed tens of thousands of civilians.¹⁰

Wagner also established itself in Syria, deploying mercenaries to fight alongside Bashar al-Assad's forces in September 2015.¹¹ Wagner trained Syrian fighters to protect the Assad regime and have also reportedly exported Syrian fighters to assist in other campaigns, specifically in Libya.¹² It was reported in 2022 that Wagner also moved these same Syrian operatives from Libya to Ukraine in support of pro-Russian forces.¹³ Wagner has deployed mercenaries to Libya since October 2018, where they reportedly were "providing technical support for the repair of military vehicles, participating in combat operations and engaging in influence operations."¹⁴ Wagner provided security and training to warlord Khalifa Haftar and his troops. In 2019, the mercenaries openly took part in Haftar's attack on the western Libyan government based in Tripoli.¹⁵ Wagner has been accused of war crimes, including torture and indiscriminate killings, throughout the country.¹⁶

Beginning in 2017, Wagner provided auxiliary military support to several conflict-ridden African countries in exchange for access to precious metals and other resources. Consequently, in Sudan, CAR, Mali, and Burkina Faso, Wagner propped up controversial governments and protected dictators from coup attempts.¹⁷ Wagner deployment has at times been justified by friendly governments as essential to counterterrorism support. However, Wagner troops exercised no restraint and were reportedly involved in large-scale civilian targeting. Wagner expanded Moscow's influence throughout the African continent, creating increased tension between Russia and European governments struggling to retain support in their former colonies.¹⁸

Among Wagner's most notorious deployments involve Mali and CAR. Wagner partnered with Mali's transitional government in September 2021 to reportedly combat Islamist jihadist movements, specifically al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM).¹⁹ On February 2, 2022, the Wagner Group arrived in Mali with the support of the Russian armed forces. More than 1,000 mercenaries were hired.²⁰ In CAR, Wagner provided political support to President Faustin-Archange Touadéra and his regime for unprecedented mining access. Wagner mercenaries first arrived in CAR in January 2018, eventually reaching a troop size of 1,890 in February 2023.²¹ Wagner was quick to demonstrate unprecedented violence throughout both countries. The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), which documents incidents of political violence around the world, estimates that Wagner was involved in 52% of civilian targeting in CAR, and 71% of political violence against civilians in Mali. Wagner targeted Fulani tribes they considered sympathetic to terrorist groups, further intensifying intercommunal rivalries and ethnic divisions throughout Mali. The violence perpetrated by Wagner has greatly overshadowed reported civilian targeting by insurgent groups.²²

Despite an interdependent relationship between Wagner and the Kremlin, differences of opinion, especially regarding Wagner's autonomy, sparked public disputes between the organization and its benefactor. On June 23, 2023, Wagner leader Yevgeny Prigozhin claimed Russian defense officials had bombed Wagner troops in Ukraine, resulting in Prigozhin calling for an armed rebellion to oust Russia's defense minister, Sergei Shoigu. A day later, the Wagner Group entered the Lipetsk region, about 225 miles south of Moscow. Immediate calls for Prigozhin's arrest followed as his troops advanced into Rostov, where Russia maintains a military headquarters for the southern region that also oversees fighting in Ukraine. Putin responded to Wagner by bolstering security around Moscow, ordering anti-terror measures in several regions and granting broader legal powers to law enforcement. The mercenary group briefly occupied Rostov before President Alexander Lukashenko of Belarus mediated the crisis, offering Wagner troops an "abandoned base" in Belarus. On June 27, Prigozhin flew into exile in Belarus under a deal that ended the rebellion. Russian authorities dropped the criminal case against the Wagner Group, but Putin announced Wagner would be shut down and its fighters would be given three choices: sign a contract with the Ministry of Defense, step down, or move to Belarus.²³

On August 23, 2023, media sources reported that a plane carrying Prigozhin and Wagner founder Dmitry Utkin crashed in Russia's Tver region. All 10 passengers were killed. According to a Wagner-linked Telegram channel, the plane was shot down by Russian air defense. Russian officials claimed Prigozhin's name was on the list of passengers.²⁴

On November 2, 2023, the Ministry of Defense (*Minoborony* or MOD) released a statement claiming Wagner had "been finally disbanded" with many of their soldiers transferred to other units under the discretion of the MOD and its subsidiary bodies.²⁵ Wagner's military components have since then come under the control of the GRU, Russia's intelligence service organ of the MOD.²⁶ Since acquiring Wagner, the GRU

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divided Wagner's activities into two sections. The first—the Volunteer Corps—is managed by Vladimir Alekseyev, the deputy chief of the GRU, covers operations in Ukraine. The other outfit, known as the Expeditionary Corps, is commanded by Andrei Aveyanov and directed by his Service for Special Activities at the GRU, which plan and manage operational activities for the forementioned corps. The Expeditionary Corps is tasked with operations across Africa.²⁷ Although Wagner forces were expected to complete their mandates, the MOD launched a recruitment campaign for the “Africa Corps.”²⁸ As Russia's official armed wing in Africa, the Africa Corps further strengthened the Kremlin's military footprint on the continent. Although not officially confirmed, media sources, including *Le Monde* and online news publication the Conversation, have conjectured that the Africa Corps is a reference to the Afrika Korps led by Nazi field marshal Erwin Rommel, which fought in North Africa during World War II. Nazi Germany venerated Rommel and the battalion for their strategic successes in North Africa.²⁹

Russia further expanded its presence across the Sahel in December 2023 when Niger's junta government signed a document to increase its military cooperation with Moscow.³⁰ With the Kremlin's relationship with Niger's junta formalized, the coup government further distanced itself from its former Western partners by terminating its sponsorship of two stabilization programs in the country, the European Union Capacity Building Mission (EUCAP Sahel Niger) and the EU Military Partnership Mission (EUMPM). The EUCAP was designed to build up Niger's civil society, while the EUMPM attempted to strengthen Niger's response to violent extremist insurgencies.³¹ As of March 2024, it is unconfirmed if the aforementioned “military cooperation” will include the deployment of the Africa Corps.

Although the Africa Corps operates almost identically to the Wagner Group's African units, the key difference is that the Africa Corps is a formal entity within the Russian Ministry of Defense, whereas Wagner was never an official arm of the Russian government. After months of speculation, Burkina Faso and Russia formalized their plans for greater military cooperation on January 25, 2024. Russia announced the deployment of 100 paramilitary fighters from the Africa Corps³² to assist Burkina Faso in protecting its borders, securing the safety of the country's junta leader, and protecting Burkinabe civilians from terror attacks.³³ Russia may reportedly deploy additional military personnel in the future. The Kremlin's “military specialists” are contracted to provide training for Burkinabe forces.³⁴

On February 7, 2024, Volunteer Corps leader Anton Yelizarov confirmed that the PMC had fully integrated with Russia's national guard. He further announced the ongoing construction of “Cossack Camps,” a new Volunteer Corps base that is reportedly in Rostov, Russia.³⁵

Doctrine:

Although the Wagner Group did not promote a specific doctrine or philosophy, the group advanced Russian interests in either geostrategic or resource-rich countries experiencing political instability. The group was outwardly motivated by Russian nationalism. However, Wagner has also demonstrated the ability to enrich itself by exploiting precious metals and other valuable natural resources throughout Africa. According to a February 2023 U.S. national intelligence report, Russia used Wagner to “try to undercut U.S. leadership; present itself as an indispensable mediator and security partner; and gain military access rights and economic opportunities.”³⁶ The end goals of Wagner, and now the Expeditionary Corps and Volunteer Corps, remain unclear, although there is a general understanding among regional scholars that the aims of the group are centered on geopolitical and economic gain for Russia.

Organizational Structure:

The Wagner Group was not a single entity but a collection of businesses and mercenary groups operating across the globe.³⁷ Although Dmitry Utkin founded the group, Wagner was financially and publicly fronted by Yevgeny Prigozhin, a formerly close Putin ally.³⁸ Although Wagner claimed to be an independent organization, Wagner's operations were closely connected to the Russian military and intelligence community.³⁹ While Russian law does not allow the existence of private military companies, Wagner was registered abroad as a complex network of various front companies.⁴⁰

MOD acquired Wagner's business entities following the dissolution of the PMC. Included among the companies was Wagner's public relations arm, the internationally designated Foundation for the Defense of National Values (FDNV). Another Wagner company absorbed by MOD was M-Invest, which disseminated social media disinformation campaigns and staged public executions in Sudan to prop up former Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir. M-Invest also operated an outpost called Meroe Gold that was granted gold exploration contracts within Sudan. Wagner also reportedly operated a radio station called Lengo Sengo in CAR. The European Union sanctioned the station in 2023 for engaging in online influence operations on behalf of Russia to manipulate public opinion.⁴¹

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Wagner worked closely with U.S.-designated entities such as the Internet Research Agency (IRA), and the Association for Free Research and International Cooperation (AFRIC). According to the Council on Foreign Relations, the IRA is a Prigozhin-owned online “troll farm,” or “troll factory.” A troll factory employs individuals who conduct disinformation propaganda activities, usually pertaining to politics and economics, on the internet. Hate speech and fake news are strategies disseminated by “trolls,” or online agitators.

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Prigozhin’s domestic commercial enterprises were acquired by the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation (*Federal'naya sluzhba bezopasnosti Rossiyskoy Federatsii* or FSB) and his communications businesses now operate under the supervision of the Foreign Intelligence Service of the Russian Federation (*Sluzhba vneshney razvedki Rossiyskoy Federatsii* or SVR).⁴⁵

Wagner’s military operations were transferred to the GRU, the Russian military intelligence agency. Under the GRU, Wagner’s activities were divided into two sections: the Volunteer Corps and the Expeditionary Corps. The Volunteer Corps would be managed by Vladimir Alekseyev, the deputy chief of the GRU, and would cover operations in Ukraine. The Expeditionary Corps is commanded by Andrei Averyanov and directed by his Service for Special Activities. The Expeditionary Corps also includes the Africa Corps, the unit that solely operates across Africa.⁴⁶ As of April 2024, the leader of the entire post-Wagner network is Anton Yelizarov, a veteran of Wagner’s campaigns in Ukraine, Syria, Mali, and the Central African Republic. The European Union had previously sanctioned Yelizarov in January 2023 for leading Wagner’s siege of Soledar in eastern Ukraine.⁴⁷

Further post-Wagner ambitions reportedly involve the opening of an official Russian military base in the southern town of Berengo, Central African Republic. The geostrategic and central location of Berengo is advantageous to Kremlin operations in the region. Additionally, Berengo hosts an airport and other necessary infrastructure to support a military base, which the Kremlin intends to use to train and meet the needs of 10,000 soldiers. Martina Schwikowski, Kossivi Tiassou, Jean Fernand Koena, “After Wagner, Russia makes new military plans in Africa,” *Deutsche Welle*, February 9, 2024, <https://www.dw.com/en/after-wagner-russia-makes-new-military-plans-in-africa/a-68213643>.

Financing:

The Wagner Group funded its brutal and far-flung operations in part by exploiting natural resources in the countries where they operated. Proceeds from gold and metal mining allowed Wagner to sustain and expand its mercenary forces.⁴⁸ In Syria, for example, Wagner was paid in natural resources, specifically oil and gas. By being paid in commodities and precious metals, Wagner’s various facilitators and front companies were able to evade sanctions imposed by the U.S. and Europe that criminalize financial cooperation with designated entities.⁴⁹

Prigozhin was often cited as one of the primary funders of Wagner, although the level of funding he allocated to the group has not been documented.⁵⁰ According to Putin, the financing of the entire Wagner Group was fully provided by the Russian state as he claimed that from “May 2022 to May 2023, the state paid 86 billion, 262 million roubles [around \$1 billion], to the Wagner Group for monetary maintenance and incentive payments.”⁵¹ Since the GRU’s official takeover of Wagner, financial packages offered to the Volunteer and Expeditionary Corps outfits are set by the agency.⁵² However, a significant portion of the PMC’s funding comes from mining contracts, with the group extracting around \$2.5 billion from the continent between 2022 and 2024.⁵³

Recruitment:

In 2023, Wagner reportedly boasted a recruited troop size of 50,000 inside Ukraine alone. Of those 50,000 fighters, 40,000 were convicts released from Russian prisons.⁵⁴ The men were recruited for six-month contracts, with some convicts being guaranteed presidential pardons following their tours.⁵⁵ Those recruits have paid a high price for a chance at freedom. According to the White House, recruited convicts comprised 90 percent of all casualties along the front lines in Ukraine.⁵⁶

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While the head of Wagner, Yevgeny Prigozhin was known for being adept at social media, using different platforms to build communication networks with military correspondents, bloggers, and potential recruits across the globe.⁵⁷ Wagner's recruitment posts were not limited to Russian-speaking countries. Researchers discovered Wagner recruitment material translated into 16 languages across Twitter, Facebook, and other social media platforms. Among the languages featured in recruitment documents were Vietnamese, French, Polish, and Spanish. By advertising their generous compensation package of 240,000 rubles—around \$2,700—per month, Wagner sought to recruit from all corners of the world. Since Wagner was not considered an international terrorist organization, its online activity was not subject to extensive moderation, which provided the group unlimited access across social media platforms.⁵⁸

In April 2023, the Institute for the Study of War claimed that the Wagner Group had recruited Ukrainian children to fight on the side of Russia. Videos shared on the Telegram platform showed young children training with assault rifles while alleged Wagner troops looked on.⁵⁹

Following the death of Prigozhin and the absorption of Wagner into the Russian Ministry of Defense (*Minoborony* or MOD), media sources noted that recruitment campaigns for Africa Corps were launched on Telegram in November 2023 and in December 2023 by African Initiative, an African-focused Russian media outlet. These campaigns were reportedly successful. Between December 2023 and February 2024, an estimated 20,000 troops signed up for a role in Africa, with deployment focused on Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. Positions within the Africa Corps were also offered to former Wagner mercenaries as well as local residents. Although reportedly seeking to enlist 40,000 troops, units are not expected to exceed 7,000 troops as the Centre for Eastern Studies noted that at the PMC's peak, troop numbers plateaued around 5,000 to 7,000 mercenaries.⁶⁰

Training:

Wagner troops were reportedly trained at the Molkino training center in Krasnodar under the supervision of the MOD. MOD was also responsible for the transportation of fighters and goods to Wagner deployments.⁶¹

Upon deployment, Wagner personnel claimed to provide training for local military and security forces. They also regularly provided security for prominent officials and leaders seeking indefinite terms in power. If deployed for counterterrorism, Wagner conducted high intensity operations and were not always held accountable for their actions.⁶² In many cases, Wagner was supplemented by official Russian military assistance, such as in Mali, where the local armed forces received combat and surveillance aircraft from Moscow.⁶³

On February 7, 2024, Volunteer Corps leader Anton Yelizarov announced the ongoing construction of the "Cossacks Camp," a base reportedly in Rostov, Russia. According to the MOD, the base will reportedly host troops from Russia's national guard as they prepare "a new volunteer corps formation of experienced Wagner personnel to reinforce Russia's war effort in Ukraine and expand Russian influence in Africa." Joe Barnes, "New Wagner leader confirms group's integration with Russian national guard," *Telegraph* (London), February 7, 2024, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2024/02/07/wagner-leader-confirms-integration-with-russian-forces/>.

Under Aveyanov, the Africa Corps division of the Expeditionary Corps now offers "regime survival packages" to the countries with existing Wagner contracts. These packages offer military support, economic and political protection from international watchdogs, and support from political technologists. Political technologists are propaganda agents who manipulate environments to achieve a politically desired result, such as supporting authoritarian leaders and keeping them in power.⁶⁴

Also known as:

- PMC Wagner⁶⁵
- Africa Corps⁶⁶
- Expeditionary Corps⁶⁷
- Volunteer Corps⁶⁸

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² "Wagner Group: Council adds 11 individuals and 7 entities to EU sanctions lists," Council of the European Union, February 25, 2023, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/02/25/wagner-group-council-adds-11-individuals-and-7-entities-to-eu-sanctions-lists/>; William Rampe, "What Is Russia's Wagner Group Doing in Africa?," Council on Foreign Relations, May 23, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/what-russias-wagner-group-doing-africa>; "Treasury Targets Financier's Illicit Sanctions Evasion Activity," U.S. Department of the Treasury, July 15, 2020, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm1058>; Sam Mednick, "After Burkina Faso ousts French, Russia's Wagner may arrive," Associated Press, April 7, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/burkina-faso-russia-wagner-jihadi-02d9235279f0991cdb6ad3ebb4d3e546>; Chris Ewokor in Abuja & Kathryn Armstrong, "Russian troops arrive in Niger as military agreement begins," BBC News, April 12, 2024,

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<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-68796359>.

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- ⁴ Alessandro Adruino, "Wagner Group is now Africa Corps. What this means for Russia's operations on the continent," The Conversation, February 14, 2024, <https://theconversation.com/wagner-group-is-now-africa-corps-what-this-means-for-russias-operations-on-the-continent-223253>.
- ⁵ Colin P. Clark, "What Happens Next with the Wagner Group?," Foreign Policy Research Institute, May 18, 2023, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2023/05/what-happens-next-with-the-wagner-group/>; "Annual Threat Assessment Of The U.S. Intelligence Community," Office of the Director of National Intelligence, February 6, 2023, <https://www.odni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2023-Unclassified-Report.pdf>.
- ⁶ "What is Russia's Wagner mercenary group and where is its leader, Prigozhin?," BBC News, July 6, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-60947877>.
- ⁷ "Treasury Sanctions the Head of the Wagner Group in Mali," U.S. Department of the Treasury, May 25, 2023, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1502>.
- ⁸ "What is Russia's Wagner mercenary group and where is its leader, Prigozhin?," BBC News, July 6, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-60947877>; "Treasury Sanctions the Head of the Wagner Group in Mali," U.S. Department of the Treasury, May 25, 2023, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1502>; "Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine: Wagner Group and RIA FAN added to the EU's sanctions list," Council of the European Union, April 13, 2023, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/04/13/russia-s-war-of-aggression-against-ukraine-wagner-group-and-ria-fan-added-to-the-eu-s-sanctions-list/>.
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- ¹² Elis Gjevori, "What the Wagner Group's insurrection means for the Middle East and Africa," Middle East Eye, June 24, 2023, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/wagner-group-russia-insurrection-middle-east-africa>.
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Wagner Group (Expeditionary and Volunteer Corps)

Key Leaders



Dmitry Utkin

Founder (deceased)



Yevgeniy Viktorovich Prigozhin

Primary funder, owner, and face of Wagner (deceased)



Anton Yelizarov

Leader of Wagner Group



Ivan Aleksandrovich Maslov

Head of Wagner and principal administrator based in Mali



Andrey Nikolayevich Ivanov

Executive for Wagner activities in Mali



Vladimir Alekseyev

Head of Volunteers Corps (Ukraine-focused missions)



Andrei Averyanov

Head of Expeditionary Corps (oversees Africa Corps)



Colonel General Yunus-Bek Yevkurov

Russian Deputy Minister of Defense and Lead Supervisor of Africa Corps in Libya

Wagner Group (Expeditionary and Volunteer Corps)

History:

Wagner Group (Expeditionary and Volunteer Corps)

Violent history:

- **January 25, 2024:** The Malian army and the Africa Corps ambush Attara village, on the banks of the Niger River and a known JNIM hideout. The forces loot property and kill seven civilians. That same day, Africa Corps fighters attack Dakka Sebbe, an area occupied by the Bozo ethnic group. Reportedly targeting JNIM fighters, the Africa Corps kill three Fulani herders accused of conspiring with Islamist militants.⁶⁹
- **January 23, 2024:** Scores of Malian soldiers and a suspected number of Africa Corps fighters ambush Nienanpela village, central Mali. One civilian is shot and killed.⁷⁰
- **December 18, 2023:** Malian and Africa Corps soldiers ambush Gatie Loumo village, central Mali, in retaliation against the community for reportedly collaborating with Islamist groups. The ambush kills at least 21 civilians and the fighters loot motorbikes, shops, and money.⁷¹
- **August 7, 2023:** In a U.N. report seen by Reuters, Wagner mercenaries are accused of committing sexual violence against women and “grave abuses of human rights and international humanitarian law.” The report asserts that these abusive tactics will act as a “deterrent for communities and armed groups who would otherwise seek to threaten the foreign security partners or harm them.”⁷²
- **June 23-27, 2023:** On June 23, Prigozhin calls for an armed rebellion to oust Russia’s defense minister, Sergei Shoigu. The next day, Wagner moves towards the Lipetsk region, about 225 miles south of Moscow. Immediate calls for Prigozhin’s arrest follow as his troops advance into Russia from Ukraine before reaching Rostov, site of the military headquarters for Russia’s southern region that also oversees fighting in Ukraine. Putin responds by ordering anti-terror measures in several regions and granting broader legal powers to law enforcement. The mercenary group briefly occupies Rostov before Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, mediating the crisis, offers Wagner troops an “abandoned base” in Belarus. On June 27, Prigozhin flies into exile in Belarus under a deal that ends the rebellion. Russian authorities drop the criminal case against the Wagner Group, but Putin announces the shutdown of Wagner, saying its fighters would either have to sign a contract with the Ministry of Defense, step down, or move to Belarus.⁷³
- **April 2023:** Media sources report that two alleged former Wagner commanders claim they killed children and civilians during their time in Ukraine. According to one of the men, orders were to “execute any men who were 15 years or older...the point was to make sure that there wasn’t a single living person.”⁷⁴
- **January 11, 2023:** Wagner assists Russian troops in their battle for Soledar, an eastern Ukrainian salt-mining town. Russia claims the town is key in taking Bakhmut, a strategic city in the Donbas region.⁷⁵
- **March 23 – March 31, 2022:** The Malian army and Wagner troops launch a counterterrorism operation in central Mali’s Moura area. An estimated 300 are killed and 51 others are arrested in the “terrorist fiefdom.” However, media sources report that dozens of people, including civilians, are killed in the attacks, leading U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres to report that Mali’s counterterrorism efforts had “disastrous consequences for the civilian population.”⁷⁶
- **March 2022:** Wagner reportedly prepares to transfer Syrian operatives within Libya to support pro-Russian forces in Ukraine.⁷⁷
- **July 21, 2021:** Wagner reportedly carries out summary executions near Bossangoa, CAR.⁷⁸
- **June 25, 2021:** The U.N. Panel of Experts on CAR reports of “indiscriminate killings” and violence against civilians at the hands of “Russian instructors.” A report to the U.N. Security Council notes that Wagner is responsible for vicious acts, including excessive use of force, rape, torture, and widespread looting in CAR.⁷⁹
- **June 2021-August 2021:** Reports of arbitrary detention, torture, and extrajudicial executions are documented in Alindao, CAR.⁸⁰
- **February 15, 2021:** CAR government troops, along with Wagner, attack a mosque in Bambari, under the guise of rooting out rebels. The troops indiscriminately shoot mosque attendees, killing at least 17, and continue their rampage across town. More than 100 fatalities are reported, most of them civilians.⁸¹
- **March 31, 2021:** The U.N. peacekeeping mission in CAR (MINUSCA) and Rwandan special forces express concerns about joint operations with Wagner over alleged human rights violations.⁸²
- **2019:** Wagner openly takes part in Libyan warlord General Khalifa Haftar’s attack on the western Libyan government based in Tripoli. The mercenaries reportedly provided security and training to Haftar and his troops.⁸³
- **January 2019:** Wagner is accused of torturing detainees in Bambari, CAR.⁸⁴
- **October 2018:** Wagner deploys mercenaries to Libya. According to U.N. experts, they are “providing technical support for the repair of military vehicles, participating in combat operations and engaging in influence operations.”⁸⁵

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- **February 2018:** Wagner troops ambush a U.S. outpost in eastern Syria, resulting in a four-hour gunfight in which 200 to 300 mercenaries are killed.⁸⁶
- **October 2017 – January 2018:** In October 2017, CAR signs a defense deal with Russia, outlining security and political support to Touadéra and his regime for unprecedented mining access across the country. Wagner mercenaries first arrive in January 2018, eventually reaching a troop size of 1,890 in February 2023.⁸⁷
- **September 2015:** Wagner deploys mercenaries to fight alongside Bashar al-Assad’s forces in Syria⁸⁸
- **2014:** Wagner troops are deployed to Ukraine, where Russia illegally annexed the Crimean Peninsula and sponsored a revolt in eastern provinces.⁸⁹

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Designations:

Designations by the U.S. Government:

- ○ **December 16, 2016:** The U.S. Department of the Treasury designates Yevgeniy Prigozhin as a Specially Designated National for contributing to Russia’s actions in threatening the sovereignty of Ukraine.⁹⁰
- ○ **June 20, 2017:** The U.S. Department of the Treasury designates the Wagner Group and Dmitry Utkin as Specially Designated Nationals for their actions threatening the sovereignty of Ukraine.⁹¹
- ○ **January 26, 2023:** The U.S. Department of the Treasury designates the Wagner Group as a transnational criminal organization.⁹²
- ○ **May 25, 2023:** The U.S. Department of the Treasury designates Ivan Aleksandrovich Maslov as a Specially Designated National for serving as Wagner head and its principal administrator in Mali.⁹³
- ○ **June 27, 2023:** The U.S. Department of the Treasury designates Andrey Nikolayevich Ivanov as a Specially Designated National for serving as a senior Wagner official and contributing to the destabilization of Mali.⁹⁴

Designations by the United Kingdom:

- ○ **September 15, 2023:** The British government adds the Wagner Group to its list of proscribed terror organizations for its involvement in destabilizing countries to benefit the Kremlin’s political goals.⁹⁵

Designations by the European Union:

- ○ **December 13, 2021:** The European Union adds the Wagner Group to its sanctions list.⁹⁶
- ○ **December 13, 2021:** The European Union sanctions on eight individuals linked to the Wagner Group: Aleksandr Kuznetsov Sergeevich, Dmitriy Valerievich Utkin, Denis Yurievich, Sergey Vladimirovich Shcherbakov, Andrei Nikolaevich Troshev, Stanislav Evgenievich Dychko, Valery Nikolaevich Zakharov, and Andrey Mikhailovich Bogatov.⁹⁷
- ○ **December 13, 2021:** The European Union imposes sanctions on Evro Polis LLC, a private company linked to the Wagner Group in Syria.⁹⁸
- ○ **February 25, 2023:** The EU Council adds 11 individuals connected to the Wagner Group to its sanctions list: Ivan Aleksandrovich, Hayk Arensoyich Gasparyan, Anton Olegovich Elizarov, Maxim Shugaley, Aleksandr Grigorievich Maloletko, Konstantin Alexandrovich Pikalov, Dimitri Sytii, Mikhail Sergeevich Potepkin, Alexander Alexandrovich Ivanov, Vitalii Viktorovitch Perfilev, and Andrei Sergeevich.⁹⁹
- ○ **February 25, 2023:** The EU adds seven entities connected to the Wagner Group to its sanctions list: Lobaye Invest SARLU, DIAMVILLE, Foundation for the Defense of National Values, Radio Centrafricaine Lengo Sengo, Meroe Gold Co. Ltd, M-Invest, and Sewa Security Services.¹⁰⁰

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Associations:

Ties to Other Entities:

- **Russia**

Wagner maintains close relationships with Russia's Chief Intelligence Office (*Glavnoye Razvedyvatelnoye Upravlenie* or GRU), the Federal Security Service (*Federal'naya Sluzhba Bezopasnosti* or FSB), and the Foreign Intelligence Service (*Sluzhba vnesheyny razvedki Rossiyskoy Federatsii* or SVR). Russia has used Wagner to "try to undercut U.S. leadership; present itself as an indispensable mediator and security partner; and gain military access rights and economic opportunities."¹⁰¹

Wagner was first involved in the Russian-Ukraine conflict in 2014, when Russia illegally annexed the Crimean Peninsula and sponsored a revolt in eastern Ukraine.¹⁰² Following Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Wagner again joined the fight. Wagner helped the Kremlin secure control of the Ukrainian town of Bakhmut. That months-long operation alone killed tens of thousands of civilians.¹⁰³

Wagner continues to have a large footprint in Ukraine, having recruited between 40,000 and 50,000 men on six-month contracts for Russia's ongoing campaign.¹⁰⁴ Wagner recruited heavily among convicts, with 40,000 eventually filling its ranks. According to the White House, 90% of all casualties on the front lines in Ukraine were former Russian convicts.¹⁰⁵

- **Mali**

Mali's transitional government announced on September 26, 2021 that it would partner with Wagner to combat Islamist jihadist movements across the country. In the \$10.8 million a month deal, Mali hired 1,000 Wagner Group mercenaries to combat AQIM and JNIM.¹⁰⁶ Upon the announcement of Mali's deal with Wagner, the United Kingdom, along with other international actors, voiced concerns that Russia could potentially support efforts to keep Mali's junta in power. On February 2, 2022, the Wagner Group arrived in Mali with the support of the Russian armed forces. According to scholars on the region, Wagner will provide training to local forces, security services to senior Malian officials, and will also spread Russian influence on the continent.¹⁰⁷

Wagner was accused of indiscriminate killings by the United Nations and the United States in April 2022, following reports that more than 300 people were killed during counterterrorism operation in central Mali's Moura area. The Malian army launched the operation from March 23 until March 31, 2022, and according to the army, an estimated 300 were killed and 51 others were arrested in the "terrorist fiefdom." However, media sources reported that dozens of people, including civilians, were killed in the attacks. U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres reported that Mali's counterterrorism efforts had "disastrous consequences for the civilian population."¹⁰⁸

Despite Wagner launching a short-lived rebellion against the Kremlin in June 2023, Russia remained adamant that the group would continue operations in Mali. The assertion followed Malian Foreign Minister Abdoulaye Diop's demands that the U.N. mission exit the country "without delay" due to accusations of "fueling community tensions." The U.N. Security Council drafted an exit plan for MINUSMA troops in Mali that was expected to begin as early as June 30, 2023.¹⁰⁹ MINUSMA's mandate ended on June 30, but troops will be allowed to withdraw from Mali through December 31.¹¹⁰

After the August 2023 death of former Wagner leader Yevgeny Prigozhin, Wagner troops remained in Mali. However, after November 2023, their forces were formally deployed under the banner of the Africa Corps. Reportedly, 1,600 Africa Corps members remained in Mali as of March 2024.¹¹¹

- **Central African Republic**

Central Africa Republic (CAR) first signed a defense deal with Russia in October 2017. The deal outlined security and political support to Touadéra and his regime for unprecedented mining access across CAR. Wagner mercenaries first arrived in CAR in January 2018, eventually reaching a troop size of 1,890 in February 2023.¹¹²

Wagner's reputation in CAR closely resembles its violent profile in Mali. A June 2021 U.N. report noted that Wagner was responsible for vicious acts including excessive use of force, rape, torture, and widespread looting.¹¹³ In early July 2023, high-level officials in CAR confirmed the departure of 400 Wagner employees. The swift departure was due to their refusal to sign new contracts with Russia's Ministry of

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Defense. Despite the exodus, around 1,300 to 1,400 Wagner mercenaries reportedly remain in the country.¹¹⁴

As of March 2024, the Expeditionary Corps maintained a presence in CAR. The corps works alongside local militias despite the government claiming Russian troops solely provide support to the national army. The Expeditionary Corps also presents further problems for former rebels. Although non-vetted former rebels are reportedly recruited by Wagner to fight armed groups, other former fighters may be incentivized to take up arms again if the Expeditionary Corps commits acts of violence against communities of which they belong.¹¹⁵

• **Libya**

Following the overthrow of dictator Muammar Gaddafi in 2014, the country has been split between two opposing governments, in the east and west of the country. Wagner provided support to the eastern-based faction led by General Khalifa Haftar, a Libyan warlord. Wagner is believed to have mercenaries in Libya since October 2018, “providing technical support for the repair of military vehicles, participating in combat operations and engaging in influence operations.”¹¹⁶ Wagner provided security and training to Haftar and his troops and in 2019 the mercenaries openly took part in Haftar’s attack on the western Libyan government based in Tripoli.¹¹⁷ According to the U.S. Department of Defense, the United Arab Emirates paid Wagner to support Haftar in Libya.¹¹⁸

From July to September 2020, approximately 2,000 Wagner troops were deployed in Libya, though estimates have not been as precise in 2023.¹¹⁹ Wagner has so far left a bloody trail in Libya, as the mercenaries have been accused of war crimes, including torture and indiscriminate killings throughout the country. Furthermore, Wagner has extended its operations into Sudan from bases in Libya.¹²⁰ As of March 2024, the Expeditionary Corps has taken over Wagner operations in Libya with troops reporting to Colonel General Yunus-Bek Yevkurov, the deputy minister of defense. Yevkurov is notoriously known for leading the Russian task force that seized Kosovo’s Pristina International Airport in 1999. In November 2023, Haftar was also reportedly exploring increased Russian support in special forces training in exchange for Russian acquisition and upgrading of former Wagner airbases in the country.¹²¹

• **Syria**

In September 2015, Russia began a bombing campaign in Syria after a request from the Assad regime in Damascus. Moscow has described its intervention as an effort to degrade ISIS forces and reduce the threat of terrorism. During the same period, Wagner deployed mercenaries to fight alongside Assad’s forces.¹²² At its peak, Wagner is thought to have deployed more than 5,000 fighters to Syria. In February 2018 200 to 300 Wagner mercenaries were killed during an assault on a U.S. outpost in eastern Syria.¹²³

On March 7, 2022, the Pentagon reported that Russia was recruiting Syrians to support its invasion in Ukraine. Media sources reported that Moscow sought volunteers to act as guards on six-month contracts, paying \$200 and \$300 a month. According to reports, Russia sought to recruit Syrian fighters due to their expertise in urban combat. It was further reported in March 2022 that Wagner began preparing Syrian fighters in Libya for transfer to Ukraine.¹²⁴ As of July 2023, Russian troops and Wagner mercenaries had left Syria.¹²⁵ However, in August 2023, Averyanov and Yevkurov reportedly visited President Bashar Al-Assad in Syria, where they discussed providing support in the form of fighter training camps run by the Expeditionary Corps in Palmyra. The training would reportedly focus on Syrian forces.¹²⁶

• **Sudan**

The Wagner Group first aligned with Sudan in 2017, when former Sudanese Dictator Omar al-Bashir allowed the group to set up a Sudanese outpost for the U.S.-designated M Invest, a Prigozhin-owned company.¹²⁷ The outpost, Meroe Gold, was granted a concession to explore gold mining sites across Sudan, which were secured by Wagner operatives. According to the U.S. Department of the Treasury, M invest was also “responsible for developing plans for former Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir to suppress protestors seeking democratic reforms.”¹²⁸ In the process, Wagner built closer ties to General Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo, the leader of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), a paramilitary group that eventually overthrew Sudan’s nascent civilian-led government in 2021. Russia reportedly supported the coup. As of April 2023, Wagner continued to supply Dagalo’s RSF with missiles to counter Sudan’s military ruler and head of its armed forces, General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan.¹²⁹

According to interviews conducted by the *Wall Street Journal* and published in early 2024, the Africa Corps maintain a presence in Sudan. The Africa Corps reportedly advances the Kremlin’s mission by employing locals to fight their battles, including offensives against Ukrainian troops that were deployed to support al-Burhan against rebel forces. In exchange for their services, locals receive a salary and branded insignia patches from the Africa Corps.¹³⁰

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• Burkina Faso

From Wagner's presence in Mali, Russia has continued to make inroads across the Sahel, particularly in Burkina Faso, Mali's southern neighbor. On September 30, 2022, armed soldiers ousted President Paul-Henri Damiba and Captain Ibrahim Traoré was proclaimed the new leader of Burkina Faso. According to Traoré, Damiba was removed due to his lack of progress in defeating the Islamists. As France's popularity has waned, Traoré supporters have shifted their allegiance towards Russia, calling for military support from the Kremlin.¹³¹

On December 15, 2022, media sources reported that Burkina Faso made an agreement with Wagner for assisting in countering jihadi groups in exchange for a mine. It is unknown when the mercenaries will arrive in Burkina Faso.¹³² Although Burkina Faso denied hiring Wagner mercenaries in April 2023, Ouagadougou has recently purchased military equipment from Russia and is expecting Russian instructors to provide training.¹³³

After months of speculation, by January 2024, Burkina Faso and Russia formalized their plans for greater military cooperation. Russia announced the deployment of 100 paramilitary fighters from the Africa Corps to assist Burkina Faso in protecting its borders, securing the safety of the country's junta leader, and protecting Burkinabe civilians from terror attacks.¹³⁴ An additional 200 Russian military personnel are expected to be deployed in the future. According to a statement on Telegram by the pro-Russia news agency Africa Initiative, the Kremlin's "military specialists" are contracted to provide training for Burkinabe forces.¹³⁵

• Venezuela

The Wagner Group reportedly deployed troops to Venezuela in January 2019 to provide security for Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro amidst wide-scale protests that sought his removal.¹³⁶ Media sources further reported that Wagner trained elite combat units in Venezuela. Moscow's alignment with Caracas may be due to Russia's interest in securing access to Venezuela's large oil reserves.¹³⁷

- **Niger** In early December 2023, shortly after Niger fell to a military coup in July 2023, the Nigerian Foreign Ministry announced that Niger's military leaders signed a document to strengthen military cooperation with Russia. The details of their "military cooperation" were not disclosed. As the Kremlin's relationship with Niger's junta formalized, the coup government further distanced itself from its former Western partners by terminating its sponsorship of two stabilization programs in the country, the European Union Capacity Building Mission (EUCAP Sahel Niger) and the EU Military Partnership Mission (EUMPM). The EUCAP was designed to build up Niger's civil society and the EUMPM attempted to strengthen Niger's response to violent extremist insurgencies.¹³⁸ Reports confirmed Africa Corps deployment to Niger in April 2024. According to the Expeditionary Corps Telegram channel, on April 24, dozens of Russian military instructors arrived in Niger to help train the country's army. Further details of the training have been limited, media sources noted that Russian servicemen also intend to install a state-of-the-art air defense system that is to be used by Niger's military.¹³⁹

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Wagner Group (Expeditionary and Volunteer Corps)

Media Coverage:

Western Media Portrayal of the Wagner Group and its Connections to the Kremlin

Media sources regularly reported on Wagner's ruthless military campaigns throughout the world and its connection to the Kremlin. Other sources detailed the Russian state's reliance on Wagner to carry out proxy wars throughout the world. According to Jen Kirby of Vox, Russia relied on Wagner to do its "bidding around the world in places where it did not want to openly commit troops or resources, where it could operate in a kind of gray zone. That granted Moscow a degree of plausible deniability as it exerted its influence and interest in other corners of the globe."¹⁴⁰ Furthermore, Yaroslav Trofimov at the *Wall Street Journal* interviewed a former deputy chief of the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU), who asserted that Wagner is Russia's only "combat unit that does [storming and breakthroughs] without asking any questions—even if it takes losses of 10% to 15% after every mission."¹⁴¹ Western portrayals have characterized Russia as seeing Wagner recruits as disposable. Wagner's treatment of fighters recruited from prison has been particularly merciless. The Voice of America confirmed with U.S. National Security Council Spokesman John Kirby, that "90% of their casualties [at the frontlines of Ukraine] are convicts."¹⁴² >

Since the Russian Ministry of Defense's absorption of the Wagner Group, media sources continue to follow the movements of the now-named Expeditionary Corps and Volunteer Corps. According to Voice of America, Putin claims Russia is not attempting to spread its influence across the continent but is rather filling a void left by France.¹⁴³ Despite the formalization of Russian military presence across Africa, media sources report that Russian forces continue to employ an unprofessional and violent approach in their missions. Acts of indiscriminate violence have not subsided, and according to the Associated Press and the Africa Defense Forum, the Africa Corps has been supporting government forces in carrying out raids that kill dozens of civilians across the Sahel, with ethnic minorities often being targeted.¹⁴⁴ Although the Wagner Group was fully disbanded in November 2023, media sources have referred to the Wagner Group and the Expeditionary Corps and Volunteers Corps as being synonymous despite the Wagner Group being an anachronistic label.

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Wagner Group (Expeditionary and Volunteer Corps)

Rhetoric:

Yevgeny Prigozhin, July 2023

On Wagner's impending rebellion against the Kremlin following a Russian missile strike that killed Wagner fighters:

"Once again I'm warning everyone: we will ... destroy everything around us. You can't destroy us. We have goals. We are all ready to die. All 25,000 of us."¹⁴⁵

Yevgeny Prigozhin, November 10, 2022

Statement to online publication The Intercept:

"Today, instead of caring about its own citizens, the U.S. government is trying to throw money away to stir up the war in Ukraine. And also to discredit any Russians who are doing good deeds around the world, including fighting thugs in Central Africa, helping the Malian government and other unprotected people and nations where the U.S. is making a global mess."¹⁴⁶

Yevgeny Prigozhin, September 26, 2022

On Wagner's creation:

"I cleaned the old weapons myself, sorted out the bulletproof vests myself and found specialists who could help me with this. From that moment, on May 1, 2014, a group of patriots was born, which later came to be called the Wagner Battalion...I am proud that I was able to defend their right to protect the interests of their country."¹⁴⁷

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