



From ‘Volunteers’ to Quasi-PMCs: Retracing the Footprints of Russian Irregulars in the Yugoslav Wars and Post-Soviet Conflicts

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Introduction

The collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), in 1991, was followed by a series of intense military conflicts that broke out along the Soviet periphery and across its former sphere of influence. The dire state of the Russian economy, domestic political turmoil and the necessity to uphold a liberal façade to its new Western backers prevented Moscow from becoming openly involved in these conflicts. However, a Russian footprint was still present thanks to the arrival of so-called “volunteers,” who poured into these emerging zones of instability. This period played an important role in the development of future Russian Private Military Companies (PMC) and the way the government would subsequently use them in other theaters. First, these Russian irregulars gained experience (not necessarily positive or state-sponsored) in regional conflicts stretching from Central Asia to the Balkans and became acquainted with the specificities of non-linear, asymmetric warfare under different geographic and climactic conditions. Second, their participation created an aura of “volunteerism” and justice-seeking that substantially increased Russia’s popularity abroad. Finally, this involvement of volunteer irregulars allowed Moscow to create zones of instability (so-called “frozen conflicts”) that it continues to use to this day for various geopolitical purposes.

Among other aspects, this paper aims to:

- Discuss the main operational theaters and composition of Russian irregular/mercenary forces in regional armed conflicts until 2013;
- Trace the fighting tactics/techniques employed by Russian irregulars;
- Discern the motivating factors driving Russian irregulars/mercenaries;

- Identify the “volunteers’ ” recruitment techniques and command-and-control (C2) structures;
- Mention and discuss the main groups/companies/organizations that formed the foundation for Russia’s current Private Military Companies;
- Present the main factors that prevented nascent Russian PMCs from pursuing the trajectory followed by Western enterprises.

Historical Roots of Russia’s ‘Volunteer’ Fighters Movement

The participation of Russian irregulars in regional conflicts has for centuries been one of the main (covert) instruments of Russia’s foreign policy. The term “mercenary” is repugnant to the Russian public and dangerous/damaging for the country’s international reputation, thus necessitating the adoption of the more neutral-sounding “volunteer”—a person taking part in hostilities not out of pecuniary interest, but instead ostensibly guided by the pursuit of justice and compassion. Indeed, it is worth underscoring that between 1812 and 1917, Russian “volunteers” took part in dozens of regional conflicts, stretching from the Balkans to North and South America as well as Africa.¹

On several occasions, the participation of Russian “volunteer” fighters in foreign conflicts played an instrumental role in dramatically reshaping the European geopolitical landscape. Namely, it would not be an exaggeration to argue that both the Greek independence (1829) and Italian national-liberation movements had Russian “roots.” The heyday of the Russian volunteer movement—the Balkan War (1875–1876)—explicitly demonstrated the active (though covert) involvement of the Russian state in the process of recruitment and support of these irregular forces. For instance, the government turned a blind eye to the formation of mobilization points for volunteers in major Russian cities. Moreover, General Mikhail Chernyayev (nicknamed the “Yermak of the 19th century”), one of the staunchest proponents of the Russian World ideology,² become the commander of the Serbian army at that time.³ Interestingly, Russian Tsar Alexander II granted official permission to active service military personnel to take part in hostilities in the Balkans upon “temporary surrender of their official duties.”⁴

Both concepts, “volunteering” (*dobrovolchestvo*) and “justice” (*spravedlivost*), have now (primarily after 2014) been elevated by the Russian political leadership to the status of a Russian national idea.⁵ As noted by Russian expert Sergey Eledinov, the ideology of “volunteerism” has evolved in Russia into an extremely convenient tool used by the government as a means to “get rid of ‘unwanted’ groups within Russian society in order to loosen internal pressure and simultaneously increase domestic patriotism.”⁶

Therefore, aside from being an effective/convenient means of indirectly participating in regional military conflicts, Russian “volunteers” constitute one of the key pillars of Russia’s version of “soft power” and, to some extent, even a part of the Russian national idea. It is rather curious that the Soviet approach—reflected in the “Internationalism” concept—turned out to be significantly less appealing to the domestic audience than the idea of “volunteerism.” For one thing, Soviet internationalism became associated with wasteful deployments of military personnel abroad; for

another, the government largely carried out these missions in a clandestine manner, unlike the Tsarist authorities prior to 1917, when (promoted) volunteerism had an aura of romanticism. Importantly, in the post-1991 period, the absolute majority of cases in which Russia covertly participated in regional armed conflicts (from Transnistria to Ukraine and even Syria), the anthem of “volunteerism” was front and center.

The ‘Roaring ‘90s’: Russian Irregulars Fighting on the Rubble of the Soviet Empire

In the 1990s, Russia’s ability to influence developments in the post-Soviet space were constrained by a number of above-mentioned factors. Thus, the lack of open military participation created the illusion of the Kremlin’s non-involvement in regional conflicts stretching from the South Caucasus to East-Central Europe and the Balkans.

Transnistria

The first major military conflict in the post-Soviet area erupted in Moldovan Transnistria (March–July 1992) and attracted large groups of Russian “volunteers”—primarily Cossacks. Though quite brief, this conflict had important and far-reaching effects. The Russian side attempted to create the image of spontaneity and unawareness. But this hardly reflected reality for four main reasons. First was the issue of timing. In 1990 (well before the outbreak of hostilities), the Transnistrian city of Dubăsari/Dubossary became a center for the re-emergence of militarized Cossacks groups that ultimately coalesced into a newly created (on February 11, 1991) Union of the Dniestrian Cossacks. Notably, this event was preceded by the Second Great Circle (*Krug*) of the Union of the Russian Cossacks (held in Stavropol), where participants reached an official decision to render military support for Transnistria. By spring 1992, new militarized Cossack formations (primarily consisting of the Black Sea, Don and Kuban Cossacks) were established in (aside from Dubăsari) Tiraspol, Bendery and Slobozia⁷—the main strongholds of the Transnistrian separatists.

Second was the issue of scope and participation. Transnistria attracted members of the Don, Kuban, Terek, Stavropol, Zaporizhia, Astrakhan, Orenburg, Ural, Siberia, Irkutsk and Zabaikalie Cossacks armies, as well as the Yakutia Cossack regiment, in addition to some “volunteers” from Moscow, St. Petersburg and Samara.

The third factor undermining Moscow’s official narrative of non-involvement was the issue of command and control. A closer look at the C2 structure of Russian “volunteer” formations operating on the territory of Transnistria reveals that the process was coordinated by highly skilled and well-trained military professionals. For instance, the person who assumed command over Russian “volunteer” forces was Colonel (ret.) Victor Ratiev—a former member of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) and a hero of the war in Afghanistan.⁸

The fourth and final point to consider included the recruitment patterns and fighting techniques. A great deal of information about this aspect of Russia’s covert war in Transnistria actually comes from the memoirs and personal testimonies of the participants. For instance, some accounts assert that Russian “volunteers” (including Cossacks already in Transnistria at the time) *de jure* represented one of the units of the anti-Chisinau Republican Guard, which was created on a professional basis. Interestingly, service in the Transnistrian conflict not only included “material

compensation,” but “compensation for war-induced injuries and a stipend to the family in case of death,” as well. Moreover, the published recollections of the Russian “volunteers” explicitly suggest that a considerable portion of these individuals were proficient in relatively sophisticated fighting techniques, well-coordinated on the battlefield and “wielding a high level of proficiency in deception [*maskirovka*].”⁹ As noted by these “volunteers,” “fresh reserves consisting of Kuban Cossacks were constantly arriving to the theater.”¹⁰

Aside from being the first solid example of so-called “hybrid warfare”¹¹ in the post-Soviet space, Transnistria became a valuable training ground (polygon) for Russian “volunteers,” many of whom would later be spotted in other regional conflicts. The second crucial aspect of the Transnistrian campaign is inseparable from the legacy of this conflict and its continued relevancy to regional security. Namely, on October 5, 2017, Kyiv and Chisinau signed an agreement establishing joint control of the Moldovan-Ukrainian border, which immediately resulted in a stern warning from the Black Sea Cossacks leadership (October 6): “[T]he Cossacks are seriously concerned about Moldova’s decision to change the existing format and create the foundation for regional destabilization, which is supported by the [United States], the [European Union] and NATO [the North Atlantic Treaty Organization]... The Cossacks are ready to stand up for the independence of Transnistria and use all means required to do so.” Incidentally, Russian conservative outlets stated that “Cossack *atamans* [heads or chieftains] all around Russia are already discussing various options (for now, unofficially) on how to support Transnistria in military terms, including by sending volunteers.”¹²

Abkhazia

The war in Abkhazia (August 1992–September 1993) became yet another theater featuring Russian “volunteers.” Curiously enough, the bulk of these forces only arrived after Transnistria and Abkhazia concluded the Treaty on Friendship and Cooperation (January 1993).¹³ This clearly demonstrated the existing ties between these two breakaway entities in the post-Soviet space. Upon conclusion of the agreement, the number of “volunteers” (many of whom travelled directly from Transnistria) by some estimates reached as high as 2,000 militants.¹⁴ This “friendly support” proved to have crucial impact on the military success of the separatist forces. Aside from the Cossacks themselves, many accounts corroborate the presence of active duty Russian military personnel who had “temporarily surrendered” their duties and relocated to the theater to take part in the hostilities south of the Caucasus Mountains.¹⁵

Georgian authorities actually tried to appeal to the Cossacks (for example, Tbilisi wrote an open letter to the *ataman* of the all-Kuban Cossack Army, Vladimir Gromov¹⁶) to try to prevent them from joining the conflict. Moreover, the Georgian side officially invited the Kuban Cossack authorities to hold a joint event that would have helped to properly analyze the current situation and, together, work out measures to resolve the tense situation on Russia’s southern border. This, however, did not stop Cossacks from Krasnodar Krai (and other regions) from joining the conflict.¹⁷ And in fact, the Terek and Don Cossacks also played an important role in the Ossetian-Ingush Conflict (October–November 1992) on the side of North Ossetia.¹⁸

Chechnya

In addition to the above-mentioned regional developments, the first Chechen conflict (1994–1996) occupies a special place. Its uniqueness was stipulated by a number of factors. Aside from taking place on Russian territory, the initial stage bore traces of “hybridity,” characterized by a combination of para-military (attempted regime change executed by small-scale groups consisting of mercenaries) and non-military means (rhetoric about “protection of the Russian-speaking minority” waged under the façade of “volunteerism”). At this juncture, it is worth emphasizing the operation that took place on November 26, 1994, which aimed to remove General Dzhokhar Dudayev (the first president of the so-called Chechen Republic of Ichkeria) from power. The operation—which employed 36 T-72 main battle tanks, several dozen armored personnel carriers (BTR) and 46 GAZ-66 trucks—marked one of the soundest (and most humiliating) defeats of the Russian special services in the post-1991 period. After the rout of the Russian mercenary forces, information came to light that the operation had been fully designed, prepared and financed by the Federal Counterintelligence Service (*Federalnaya Sluzhba Kontrrazvedki*—FSK). Anatoly Kulikov, a Russian Army general and interior minister of Russia (1995–1998), broadly hinted that the operation was prepared at the very top of the Russian state architecture.¹⁹

The main forces were assembled from the 2nd Guards Motor Rifle “Tamanskaya” Division, the 4th Guards “Kantemirovskaya” Tank Division, the 18th Separate Motor Rifle Brigade, as well as the Higher Officers course Vystrel (located in Solnechnogorsk, Moscow Oblast).²⁰ “Volunteers” were transported from the Chkalovsky military airbase (Moscow Oblast) to Mozdok (Republic of North Ossetia–Alania). After this “expeditionary force” was forced back, one of its members stated that, for his service, he received a preliminary “honorarium” of \$324, while an additional \$972 was to be given upon completion of the task. Interestingly, the Russian side had, in fact, promised an absolutely unrealistic (for the time) compensation package: light injury would result in a payout of \$8,103, a more serious injury would net \$16,207, a serious wound was worth \$24,311, whereas, in case of death, the family was to receive \$48,622.²¹ These pledged sums pointed to the authorities’ excessive confidence in the mission and ignorance of the opponent’s capabilities.

However, after the mercenary forces were decimated, Russian officials stated they were unaware of any Russian soldiers taking part in the hostilities. The most colorful quote came from then–Minister of Defense Pavel Grachev, who ridiculed the operation for its unprofessionalism: he highlighted the “terrible mistake of sending tanks into the city” (which the Russian military command would itself do weeks later), adding that those “people were mercenaries—not Russian soldiers.”²² Importantly, in a later statement, Ruslan Khasbulatov, one of the leaders of the anti-Dudaev opposition in Chechnya, argued that the above-mentioned mercenary operation was tailored in line with the “Afghan scenario”²³ and would have included, upon “entering Grozny, the imposition of a puppet government of ‘national restoration,’ which would have, via special decree, legalized the introduction of the Russian regular army... [Regarding] Dudaev, he should have shared the fate of Hafizullah Amin, [and been] killed in the presidential palace—everything had been planned just like that.”²⁴

A second interesting, though not frequently mentioned detail pertaining to the first Chechen conflict, pertains to the growing role of Cossacks and the related issue of “volunteerism.” Remarkably, in 1996, the 694th Mechanized Battalion (unofficially bearing the name of General Aleksey Yermolov²⁵) was created and composed exclusively of Terek Cossacks, on a volunteer basis. Perhaps, the most crucial aspect was the fact that the battalion was established at the personal

initiative of Army General Anatoly Kvashnin, the chief of the Russian General Staff (1997–2004).²⁶ Notably, during the active phase of the second Chechen campaign (1999–2000), Cossacks arguably played an even greater role. For example, the 205th Mechanized Brigade was amply filled out with Cossacks. Aside from their employment in active military operations, Russian Cossacks were tasked with para-military functions: namely, they constituted the backbone of curfew units (a prototype of Russia's current military police in Syria) that were deployed in the Shelkovskoy, Naursky and Nadterechny districts. Also, aside from the above-mentioned details, “a great number of Cossacks signed contracts and served in ‘regular,’ non-Cossacks formations.”²⁷

Russian ‘Volunteers’ in the Balkans: Defending the Russian World, Promoting Their Own Interests

A particularly important turning point occurred during the 1990s in the Balkan theater, where the participation of Russian forces (a) bore visible traits of a “hybrid” operation, (b) contained a strong ideological element, (c) had a lasting non-military (propagandist/ideological) effect, and (d) became an organic melding of military and non-military characteristics.

In autumn of 1992, a number of major Russian cities saw the appearance of recruitment campaigns aimed at assembling forces sympathetic to the Serbian cause. The very first of these “volunteer” units was formed by a Cossack, Alexander Zagrebov, who had established contacts with the leadership of Republika Srpska (Serb Republic) in the city of Višegrad. The two main venues of recruitment for Zagrebov's volunteers were the city of Saratov (coordinated by the local military commissariat) and Moscow. The backbone of these “volunteer forces” was comprised of former military, veterans of regional conflicts (primarily, Transnistria) and Cossacks.²⁸

Overall, a wide range of diverse bodies/entities stood behind this mobilization process. But the following ones played a particularly crucial role:

- The Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR);
- The National Patriotic Forces of Russia (NPSR), which managed to register 1,200 “volunteers” in Moscow and Moscow Oblast alone²⁹;
- The Union of Russian Officers;
- Various regional Cossack organizations.

In trying to reach their destination (the Balkans), Russian “volunteers” had to demonstrate non-trivial creativity and employ various means of deception. According to one testimonial from this time, a group of 50 Cossacks (traveling from Russia to Belgrade via the territory of Czechoslovakia), in an attempt to traverse various borders, presented themselves as members of a performing folk arts group (ensemble ‘*Kazachek*’)—this is how they explained the Cossack attire in their luggage.³⁰

Despite the existence of the massive multi-city mobilization campaign, it would be inaccurate to state that the Russian government stood behind the process of raising the “volunteers” to fight in

the Balkans. Indeed, after the facts of this campaign became public, the Ministry of Justice unequivocally put out a statement underscoring the “existence of legislation that concerns mercenary activities,” while the Federal Security Service (FSB) urged the forces engaged in “unlawful recruiting of militants” to immediately stop their activities, claiming at the same time that this campaign was being done “on purpose... for either propagandist effect, or to boost their electoral attractiveness.” Among the Russian regions, Tatarstan expressed the greatest level of concern, especially after the Tatar Public Center started recruiting local Muslim volunteers to render military support to the Kosovo Albanians.³¹ Therefore, it seems quite clear that the process of raising “volunteers” was not initiated/coordinated by the Kremlin. Rather, it should be seen as part of unfolding intense political strife between Moscow and the so-called “Red Belt”³²—a group of Russian regions hit particularly hard by the collapse of their heavy industry after the collapse of the Soviet Union that exhibit stable support for the Communist Party and other left-wing radical groups. This being said, the absence of the Kremlin’s direct participation did not mean that the process of recruitment was initiated/executed by marginal circles alone or that it did not enjoy sympathy from at least some share of Russian ruling elites. In fact, by 2014, many of the organizations/actors that stood behind the “Balkan adventure” became actively involved in recruiting Russian militants to engage in hostilities in the Ukrainian Donbas.

Regarding the Russian militants who took part in fighting in the Balkans (1992–1999), the following formations should be mentioned:

1. The First Russian Volunteer Squad (RDO-1), which was formed in September 1992 but later transformed into a larger formation;
2. The Second Russian Volunteer Squad (RDO-2), which came to be known as the “Tsar’s Wolves.”³³ It acted from 1992 until the fall of 1993. Many sources have claimed that this squad demonstrated the highest level of fighting skill and determination compared to all other “volunteer” formations. After disbanding, part of the squad joined the Serbian “version”—the Serbian *Spetsnaz*, nicknamed the “White Wolves.”³⁴
3. A separate squad under the command of midshipman Aleksandr Shkrabov, which was active until 1994. Subsequently, its members either joined the “White Wolves” or the Serb Volunteer Guard (SDG), headed by the war criminal Željko Ražnatović (*nom de guerre* “Arkan”) and partly composed of the fans of the football club FK Crvena Zvezda³⁵ (incidentally, this team has been sponsored by Gazprom since 2010).
4. The “First Cossack Sotnia”—a squad of Cossacks that emerged and started to act in Višegrad, eastern Republika Srpska—which was equipped with elements of heavy artillery and intelligence-gathering devices, and was primarily employed as “shock wave infantry troops.”³⁶

The specificities of warfare in this theater (the “pocket” defense; the lack of a clear front line; wooded-mountainous landscape; partisan-like warfare; ethnic cleansing campaigns) gave the Balkan wars a “sense of mass vendetta, perfectly catering to volunteer-type warfare.”³⁷ The memoir of one member of a Russian “volunteer” squad gave the following interesting recollection: “Our unit was performing tasks of some sort of flying squad [a highly maneuverable unit that can

be rapidly deployed/transferred to any segment of the theater], used in the most dangerous areas of the frontline. We were used in various missions, including sabotage and frontline intelligence. No one cared about our lives. Russian squads were used as a shock wave infantry force.”³⁸

Leaving aside personal recollections, it would be worthwhile to point out some general takeaways as well as key aspects that characterized the operational principles exercised by Russian “volunteers” during the Balkan wars:

- A squad (up to ten fighters) proved to be the most effective type of formation for this type of conflict (semi-partisan). Interestingly, the Russian military-political leadership has, over time (especially after the outbreak of the Libyan civil war in 2011), become increasingly interested in the employment of this operative type;
- “Hybrid structure,” reflected in the joint operations of local forces (Serbs) and Russian “volunteers.” Curiously, this principle was adopted and has been practiced by the Special Operations Forces (SOF) in Syria—an elite formation created in Russia in March 2013.³⁹

On the other hand, it is rather interesting to note that, as early as 2004, some (ultra)conservative Russian military experts started to call for the regular Armed Forces to adopt and gradually integrate the experience gained by Russian “volunteers” in the Balkans. Specifically, these thinkers was claimed that the “volunteer” experience could be extremely helpful during military operations carried out in mountainous conditions, where “special operations forces acting in small groups could perform various missions in an autonomous regime.” The experts also argued that “a greater role for small military formations could be of critical importance if military reforms [are passed that favor] gradual decreases in manpower.” Special emphasis was put on the organization structure and selection criteria to be applied to “volunteers” who would be employed in future conflicts. Namely, it was underscored that the process of selection was to be upgraded to a much higher level. On top of that, it was accentuated that “a special role should be allocated to the formation of elements of a volunteer culture among Russian soldiers, which ought to create a link between the new and the pre-1917 Russia and traditions of volunteerism of the 19th century.”⁴⁰ Indeed, one of the key pillars of Russian information operations in the post-2014 period contains critical elements of this approach.

Out of several dozen military or paramilitary operations carried out by Russian “volunteers” during the Yugoslav wars, the following ones are usually praised as most successful:

- The takeover and control of Tvrtkovići (eastern part of Bosnia);
- The defense of Skilani;
- The raid along the Rudo-Goražde line;
- The defense of Zaglavak (eastern Bosnia), which not only displayed the crucial importance of the principle of asymmetry, but also became, according to Aleksandr Kravchenko (one of the Russian veterans of this campaign), “one of the most heroic pages of Russian

contemporary military history and the brightest episode of the Russian volunteer movement.”⁴¹

Yet, the participation of Russian militants in the Balkans—vested in the attire of “volunteerism” and struggle for the rights of Serbs—was not as unequivocally selfless as portrayed by Russia’s mainstream observers/commentators. In effect, the Balkan experience, where these mercenary fighters gained or sharpened their knowledge of non-linear military operations and sapper works became an effective “resume builder” that helped many of the militants in their future “careers” and subsequent employment by Private Military Companies in Iraq and Afghanistan.⁴²

The prospect of a future job with a foreign PMC was not the only motivating factor driving these Russians’ travel to the Balkans to gain/improve their fighting skills—experienced fighters would become a sought-after commodity at home, too. The RDO-1, commanded by former marine officer Valery Vlasenko, was assembled in St. Petersburg by the private security company Rubikon (sometimes considered Russia’s first PMC), which was headed by Yuri Beliayev.⁴³ This case deserves some additional elaboration. Aside from his “business” activities, Beliayev was implicated with the mafia and several criminal-related scandals in St. Petersburg (one of the most criminalized zones in Russia) throughout the 1990s. As such, clearly one of the main sources of “fighting experience” gained by members of Rubikon came from their participation in the Balkan wars. Another aspect stems from the nexus between Russian militants/private militarized contractors and the Russian right-wing nationalist movement. Namely, in 1992, Beliayev registered the Russian National Republican Party (patterned after a pre-1917 nationalist organization of the same name), which included a militarized wing—the so-called “Russian National Legion.” This paramilitary formation “took part in hostilities in different regional conflicts that broke out in various parts of the Commonwealth of Independent States [CIS] where ethnic confrontations emerged.”⁴⁴ Back in 2002, Russian investigative reporters claimed that the Rubikon was not merely a private security company, but a tool for “preparing a nationalistic cadre composed of professional military personnel [and] former officers from various security services... This was to prepare and train people capable of carrying out terrorist acts and wage para-military operations.”⁴⁵ These details attain a qualitatively different meaning in light of the events that would take place in 2014 and considering the eventual emergence of the Wagner Group PMC, whose alleged commander, Dmitry Utkin, is known for his deep far-right sentiments.

At this juncture, it is worth closely examining a critically important remark that Igor Strelkov/Girkin (also a participant of the Balkan wars) made on a radio program back in 1999. While on air, Strelkov outlined two key aspects related to the Russian volunteer movement. First, he confirmed that “many of the volunteers went to the Balkans with the sole purpose of gaining military experience, due to the fact that this war was much more serious than Transnistria.” Second, he offered a rough guiding principle (perhaps, inadvertently) that would form a quasi-legal justification of sorts for future Russian PMCs (Private Armies) after 2013. Namely, Strelkov stated that, according to the Russian Penal Code, a “mercenary” is a “person who acts for pecuniary interests and is not a citizen of a country taking part in hostilities,” which means, he argued, that being a “volunteer” is totally different from being a mercenary. “This means that no one will construe you as a mercenary if you decide to take part in a military conflict as a volunteer, right?” Strelkov emphasized.⁴⁶ Indeed, as would become apparent later, when engaging in hostilities on Ukrainian territory, Moscow would extensively rely on this “volunteer”-related anthem.

First Quasi-PMCs Emerge

As the 1990s drew to a close, a number of groups and individuals closely linked to Russia's various security services came to believe that the knowledge and skills they had gained as volunteers in conflicts around the world could be lucratively monetized. Thus, the period between 1998 and 2013 saw multiple Russian attempts to establish PMCs in line with Western patterns. Yet, Russian realities meant that the final product ended up as an odd "hybrid," combining the traits of civilian-focused Private Security Companies (PSCs) and PMCs. This awkward mix, by and large, contributed to the overall unsuccessfulness of the initiative.⁴⁷

Among the many players that appeared during this period, the following were arguably most important:

Antiterror-Orel

Established in 1998, this organization's activities were primarily concerned with physical protection of various objects, rendering training and consultancy services and some other niche tasks, including sapper works. The highest level of services provided by the company was premised on its composition: Approximately 40 percent of the personnel were former members of military intelligence or *Spetsnaz* of the Airborne Troops (VDV); 40 percent came from the special operations forces, such as the 7th Squad of Special Forces ("ROSICH") and the 1st Special Purpose Unit of the Internal Forces ("Vityaz"); while the final 20 percent were veterans of the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces (GU), Spetsgruppa "V" ("Vympel") and the Russian navy.⁴⁸ The group had big plans pinned on work in Iraq, but Operation Iraqi Freedom (2003) derailed these designs, putting Western PMCs in the driver's seat. As a result, in a 2010 interview with the Russian edition of *Forbes*, the head of Antiterror-Orel, Sergey Epishkin, admitted that his company had on its permanent payroll only 24 person and 300 in "active reserve." After the failure to secure business in Iraq, the company tried its luck in Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Angola and India, primarily "supporting cargo transportation and rendering security-related consultancy services." In 2008–2009, the company worked in Serbia (Niš and Paraćin).⁴⁹

Antiterror

This firm, dating back to 2003, presents yet another interesting case study with far-reaching implications. Established by members of the VDV, this group, which also ran its own training center, reportedly developed rather cordial ties with some "authoritative people" in Moscow. This allowed the company to sign contracts with Tatneft, Energoinzhenering and the Russian Engineer Company to render security services in Iraq. Between 2004 and 2007, Antiterror actively participated in endeavors of Russian companies in Iraq: for this purpose, a special *ad hoc* group operating under its umbrella—Tigr Top-rent Security—was formed (2005). However, upon completion of its tasks and due to limited further opportunities, the group was disbanded in 2006.⁵⁰ Overall, the direct legacy of this company was mostly superfluous except for one aspect: Antiterror (and its above-mentioned *ad hoc* branch) gave rise to a number of other PMCs, including Redut-Antiterror, Ferax, Phoenix and, most importantly, Moran Security Group—a company with multiple ties to the notorious Wagner Group.

Redut-Antiterror

Redut-Antiterror (2008) presented a broad platform comprised of a number of smaller organizations. Its emergence was related to an initiative by veterans of the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), VDV, GU as well as the Internal Troops of the Ministry for Internal Affairs (MVD), all of whom had considerable experience with military operations and peacekeeping missions abroad. The company (later renamed Centre-R) took part in missions on the territory of Iraq (Kurdistan), Syria, Somalia, countries of the Caribbean basin and the former Yugoslavia.⁵¹ One interesting detail implicitly points to its participation (apparently, as military consultants) in the August 2008 Russo-Georgian conflict, where the company was training the Abkhazian armed forces.⁵²

The RSB Group

Created in 2005, the RSB Group emerged on the basis of three private security firms: Fortpost, Razvedka v Sfere Biznesa and the RSB-Group.⁵³ According to available information, this PMC (still very active and reportedly possessing branches/offices in Turkey, Germany, Italy and Senegal) has not taken part in any military hostilities. Its specialties are:

- Military consultancy;
- Sapper works;
- Intelligence gathering and analytics;
- Armed physical protection of various objects and cargoes as well as maritime routes.

Since its conception, the company has professed to have carried out a great number of missions, with the most notable apparently occurring in such high-risk areas as the Gulf of Aden and the Gulf of Guinea as well as the Strait of Malacca (one of the most important shipping lanes in the world). The group was also commissioned to conduct sapper works in Libya (Benghazi), at the factories owned by the Libyan Cement Company; the contract was allegedly worth \$10 million.⁵⁴ The RSB Group may also have played some role in the “Crimean operation,” apparently either in logistics or some other non-military capacity.⁵⁵ According to the company’s director, Oleg Krinitsyn, when it comes to hiring, “a clear priority [is given] to the veterans of Vypel and Alfa.”⁵⁶ In one of his interviews, Krinitsyn pointed out that the PMC is organized in line with the army principle, including as related to command and control (C2), elements of intelligence gathering, disinformation, shockwave and tactical preparation.⁵⁷

This being said, the RSB Group and its declared activities should be assessed with a great deal of caution due to the visible discrepancy between its professed achievements, observed facts on the ground, and some unsavory episodes related to the company and its track record. Namely, authoritative Russian experts close to the PMC industry have argued that there is little concrete proof to independently corroborate the impressive list of achievements showcased on the RSB Group’s webpage. And the little that can be verified hardly differs from the activities of “any

standard private security company (trainings, seminars) and/or military-patriotic clubs.” Last, but not least, many of the pictures from the company`s webpage had actually been appropriated from another PMC (from New Zealand).⁵⁸

Moran Security Group

Consisting of a broad spectrum of smaller entities, the Moran Security Group (founded in 2011) presents a qualitatively different case study compared to the above-mentioned companies. Besides the fact that this PMC *de facto* represents a consortium of smaller companies (with different profiles/specializations), its tasks and areas of expertise are much broader than the “standard packages” offered by similar enterprises. Importantly, the Moran Security Group specializes in customs and border control, rescue missions (including the release of hostages and anti-pirate naval operations), preparation for military operations, as well as rendering physical protection to VIPs (Russian information outlets have claimed that “one of the company`s clients was Bashar al-Assad”).⁵⁹

The high level of expertise exhibited by this PMC can be attributed to the personalities of its founders. The already mentioned Boris Chikin⁶⁰ built a remarkable career in the Soviet Armed Forces: an expert in mountain-shooting preparation (*gorno-strelkovaya podgotovka*), he worked in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, training Soviet special forces for military operations in Afghanistan. In the 1990s, he undertook additional training in the Israeli Security Academy, Ltd. (the “Academy”) and in China. Also, he “took part in armed conflicts in other countries.”⁶¹

Other Moran Security Group founders also deserve mention⁶²:

- Viacheslav Kalashnikov is a highly decorated lieutenant colonel (ret.) of the FSB who built his career in the KGB, receiving the Order of the October Revolution (the second-highest Soviet order, after the Order of Lenin). Another interesting biographical detail is his “consultancy” work for Aleksandr Torshin, the former deputy head of the Central Bank of Russia who is closely linked to Maria Butina (accused by the United States of spying)⁶³;
- Igor Nikov is a captain of the 1st rank (ret.) and served as a nuclear submarine commander. Upon his retirement and inception into the Moran Security Group, he assumed responsibilities as a key expert in naval weaponry and munitions;
- Sergey Emelin is a captain of the 2nd rank (ret.) and also once served as a commander on a nuclear submarine. Later, he was named deputy director of the Murmansk branch of the Ministry of Emergency Situations (MChS), before taking over as head of the rescue squad of the MChS in St. Petersburg. At Moran, he headed the private firm`s 1st Naval Department.

Unlike other Russian PMCs, the Moran Security Group used to possess (at least until 2015) its own fleet, consisting of the following vessels: *Ratibor* (ESU2529), *Maagen* (E5U2139), *Anchor I* (E5U2491) and *Deo Juvante* (E5U2630). In 2012, Moran became embroiled in a massive scandal involving one of its ships, the *Myre Seadiver*, which (along with the crew) was detained by Nigerian authorities on suspicion of arms smuggling. Indeed, after an onboard search, Nigerian forces found

and confiscated 14 AK 47 rifles (with 3,643 pieces of ammunition) and 22 Benelli MR1 rifles (with 4,955 pieces of ammunition). The reaction of Moran’s management to this incident was quite unexpected. Specifically, company officials defiantly declared that the PMC could deal with the Nigerian Armed Forces without any support from Russian government institutions, relying solely on its own resources and capabilities:

We would like to ask the President of the Russian Federation to give us permission to carry out an operation to rescue Russian citizens. We are ready for that, and we have everything that is needed. We have spent many years in Nigeria, and we are perfectly aware of the capabilities of its armed forces and police, their equipment and the level of preparation. We can do it. We need no assistance... We have experts—from a former commander of a submarine to a special forces commander. We have several thousand highly qualified fighters with military experience, who have taken part in all recent military campaigns... We are waiting for the decision of our government.⁶⁴

It is difficult to deduce whether this statement was meant as an element of an information campaign, or whether it truly reflected the Moran Security Group’s actual capabilities. After 2014, Moran seems to have entirely fallen off of media coverage; but this may have simply been a deliberate ruse, given the company’s involvement in the Syrian civil war and events in the southeastern Ukraine.

Conclusion

Reflecting on the general failures of nascent Russian PMCs to gain much traction or achieve economic success between 1991 and 2013, one can point to a whole constellation of limiting factors. However, arguably the two most crucial ones were:

1. The lack of an appropriate legal foundation. Despite rich speculation (still ongoing) and high hopes, PMCs and their members never acquired legal status in Russia—a critical precondition for normal business activities both at home and, more importantly, abroad. As “ghost” businesses (*de jure* non-existent, but *de facto* active), Russian PMCs are effectively private armies and their members mercenaries. Consequently, they are largely barred from engaging in legal commercial projects in other countries.⁶⁵
2. Saturation of the market. The global PMC market was already largely divided up among Western players prior to 1991, and it became even more Western-dominated in the aftermath of the US-led campaigns in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003). Indeed, Western PMCs not only wield considerable expertise, indispensable regional ties and thorough knowledge of the local market/specificities, they importantly also enjoy a strong reputation—something Russian operators sorely lack. Moreover, by the early 1990s, Western PMCs had long departed from their previous work patterns and reoriented themselves into business enterprises rather than instruments of warfare and/or military operations.

Taking into consideration these two aspects, it is instructive to once again refer to the notorious “*Myre Seadiver* affair” involving the Moran Security Group vessel in Nigeria. Indeed, the

incident's aftermath also had a profound impact on the general trajectory of Russian PMC/PSC sector. Following the impounding of this ship, Moran founder Boris Chikin complained that “the whole anti-piracy market has been hijacked by the Brits, [and] they will never allow an outsider.”⁶⁶ It seemed rather clear to Russian actors in this space that “playing by the rules” was a road to nowhere—Russian PMCs lacked competitiveness on the global market and were generally unwelcome in the already established “club.” Thus, some Russian PMCs decided to take a different tack, trying to apply 1960s-era patterns of PMC business to 21st century realities. This led to an experiment, in 2013, that resulted in the creation of the notorious Slavonic Corps Limited—a major focus of the next two papers in this series.

Notes

¹ “Istoriya dobrovolcheskogo dvizheniya v Rossii,” *Politrussia.com*, September 4, 2014, <http://politrussia.com/geroi-dobrovoltzy/istoriya-dobovolcheskogo-dvizheniya-v-rossii-201/>.

² The Russian World ideology aims to spread Russia's influence abroad by promoting values strongly premised on conservatism and Orthodox Christianity, the Russian language, and historical narratives in line with anti-Western ideology. This idea, initially implemented by the Russian World Foundation (created in 2007, after a special decree signed by Vladimir Putin), reached its “maturity” after the Russian Orthodox Church fully embraced it in 2009, when Kirill (an active proponent of expansion of Russia's influence abroad) became Russian Patriarch.

³ I. E. Andreevsky, K. K. Arsenyev, O. O. Petrushevskiy ed., “Russkiy Mir, Sankt-Peterburgskaya gazeta (1871–1880 gg.),” *Entsiklopedicheskiy slovar Brokgauza I Efrona*, T 82 I 4 dop., (Spb., 1890–1907).

⁴ Igor Bocharnikov, “Russkie dobrovoltsy v natsionalno-osvoboditelnykh voynakh XIX veka,” *Nauchno issledovatel'skiy tsentr problem natsyonlanoy bezopasnosti*, February 2, 2016, <http://nic-pnb.ru/analytics/russkie-dobrovoltzy-v-natsionalno-osvoboditelnyh-voynah-xix-veka/>.

⁵ Petr Akopov, “Printsypr spravedlivosti stanet osnovoy uspekha Rossii,” *Vzglyad*, February 20, 2019, <https://vz.ru/politics/2019/2/20/965222.html>.

⁶ “Sergey Eledinov ob istokakh i smysle russkogo dobrovolchestva,” *Rusmonitor.com*, February 2, 2018, <https://rusmonitor.com/sergeji-eledinov-ob-istokakh-i-smysle-russkogo-dobovolchestva.html>.

⁷ Mariya Mikhalkina, “Uchastie kubanskikh kazakov v regionalnykh konfliktakh na postsovet'skom prostranstve (na primere voyn v Prednyestrovye i Abkhazii v 1990-e gody),” *Teoriya i praktika obshchestvennogo razvitiya*, No. 12, (2013): 80, <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/uchastie-kubanskikh-kazakov-v-regionalnykh-konfliktakh-na-postsovet'skom-prostranstve-na-primere-voyn-v-pridnestrovie-i-abkhazii-v-1990-e-gg>.

⁸ Georgiy Turulin, “Kazaki-dobrovoltzy v Prednyestrovye,” *Voenoboz*, July 17, 2011, http://voenoboz.ru/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=395:2011-07-17-08-18-01&catid=58:-11-&Itemid=37.

⁹ Aleksandr Dzykovitskiy, *Etnokulturnaya istoriya kazakov, Popytka restavratsii Chast V.*, Book 6, (Litres: 2018).

¹⁰ Gennadiy Kotov, “Kazaki v Prednyestrovye,” *Kazaki.by*, accessed April 2, 2019 <http://www.kazaki.by/literatura/pmr/>.

¹¹ That is, the use of “volunteers” in the Transnistrian conflict reflected a combination of non-linear military operations and a strong information-related component.

¹² Igor Usoltsev, “Kazachiy rubezh po Dnestru,” *Segodnya.ru*, October 20, 2017, <http://www.segodnia.ru/content/193608>.

¹³ “Dogovor mezhdru Pridnestrovskoy Moldavskoy Respublikoy I Respublikoy Abkhaziya o družbhe I sotrudnichestve,” *Ministerstvo Inostrannykh Del Pridnestrovskoy Moldavskoy Respubliki*, January 26, 1993 <http://mfa-pmr.org/ru/dDJ>.

¹⁴ “Tatyana Turanskaya: abkhazskiy i pridnestrovskiy narod svyazyvaet mnogoletnyaya družbha I istoricheskaya sudba,” *Informatsyonnoe Agentstvo Novosti Pridnestrovy*, September 30, 2013, <https://novostipmr.com/ru/news/13-09-30/tatyana-turanskaya-abkhazskiy-i-pridnestrovskiy-narody-svyazyvaet>.

¹⁵ “Dobrovoltsy v Abkhazii 1992-1993gg. Kto oni? ” *Zen.yandex.ru*, September 19, 2018, <https://zen.yandex.ru/media/id/5af411c2f031739aeef3bef6/dobrovolcy-v-abkhazii-19921993-gg-kto-oni-5ba20386a679a400aac65540>.

¹⁶ Gromov would later receive medal of honor from Abkhaz authorities and Venerable Sergius of Radonezh Order from the Russian Orthodox Church.

¹⁷ Keshtov T.M., Tsulaya G.V., *Dobrovoltsy v Otechestvennoy voyne Abkhazii 1992–1993. Dokumenty I materialy*, (Sukhum: Akademiya nauk Abkhazii, 2014), http://apsnyteka.org/file/dobrovoltsy_v_otchestvennoy_voyne_abkhazii_1992_1993_2014.pdf.

¹⁸ Nikolay Dyakonov, “Kazaki v XXI veke: uchastie v voyennykh konfliktakh i sluzhba v armii,” *Antimaydan*, accessed April 2, 2019, <https://antimaidan.ru/article/6761>.

¹⁹ Anatoliy Kulikov, *Tyazhelye zvezdy*, (Moscow: 2002), 240–241.

²⁰ Vladimir Voronov, “Na Kavkaz!” *Sovershenno sekretno*, October 28, 2014, <https://www.sovsekretno.ru/articles/id/4422/>.

²¹ Vladimir Voronov, “Tanki v Groznom. 20 let nazad byl dan hod Pervoy chechenskoy voyne,” *Krym. Realii*, November 26, 2014, <https://ru.krymr.com/a/26711455.html>.

²² Vladimir Voronov, “Shturm kotorogo ne bylo,” *Radio Svoboda*, October 17, 2014, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/26641302.html>.

²³ Operation Storm-333 (27 December 1979) known as the storm of the Tajbeg Palace.

²⁴ Ruslan Khazbulatov, *Vzorvannaya zhyzn*, (Moscow: Izdatelskiy dom ‘Graal’, 2002) 311.

²⁵ Aleksey Petrovich Yermolov (1777–1861) was a Russian General, nicknamed in Russian historiography “the subjugator of the Caucasus.”

²⁶ “Batalyon imeni Yarmolova. Terskiye kazaki. 1996,” *Pereprava*, November 16, 2011, <http://pereprava.org/culture/488-batalon-imeni-ermolova-terskie-kazaki-1996.html>.

²⁷ Boris Dzhherelievskiy, “Kazaki Tamani,” *Spetsnaz Rossii*, June 5, 2012, <http://www.specnaz.ru/articles/188/23/1610.htm>.

²⁸ Viktor Zaplatin, “Kazaki sredi dobrovoltshev na Balkanakh v kontse XX veka,” *Russkaya Narodnaya Liniya*, March 31, 2004, http://ruskline.ru/monitoring_smi/2004/03/31/kazaki_sredi_dobrovolcev_na_balkanah_v_konce_xx_veka/.

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- ²⁹ Dragan Raykovich, “Kto oni:” *Srpska.ru*, August 19, 2004, <http://www.srpska.ru/article.php?nid=413&sq=&crypt>.
- ³⁰ Viktor Zaplatin, “Kazaki sredi dobrovol'tsev na Balkanakh v kontse XX veka,” *Russkaya Narodnaya Liniya*, March 31, 2004, http://ruskline.ru/monitoring_smi/2004/03/31/kazaki_sredi_dobrovol_cev_na_balkanah_v_konce_xx_veka/.
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- ³² The “Red belt” included the following regions/entities: the Smolensk, Bryansk, Kaluga, Orel, Kursk, Belgorod, Ryazan, Lipetsk, Tambov, Voronezh, Penza, Ulyanovsk, Saratov, Volgograd and Astrakhan, Orenburg, Kurgan, Omsk, Novosibirsk regions and Chita Oblast and Altai Krai.
- ³³ Its backbone was comprised of militants who espoused more-or-less Monarchist (primarily, its neo-Byzantium type) views.
- ³⁴ Sergey Smirnov, “‘Tsarskie volki’ v Bosnii,” *Oficery Rossii*, accessed April 10, 2019, <http://oficery.ru/security/3740>.
- ³⁵ Aleksey Sochnev, “Natsionalnost musulmane,” *Lenta.ru*, June 7, 2016, https://lenta.ru/articles/2016/06/07/yugoslavia_islam/.
- ³⁶ Sergey Spiridonov, “‘Tsarskie volki v Bosnii,’” *Segodnya.ru*, November 7, 2007, <http://www.segodnia.ru/content/21595>.
- ³⁷ Mikhail Polikarpov, “Dobrovol'tsy. Balkanskiy dnevnik,” *Vremya novostey*, June 6, 2002, available at: http://www.lib.ru/MEMUARY/JUGOSLAVIA/s_polikarpov2.txt_with-big-pictures.html.
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- ⁴¹ Dmitriy Bernatskiy, “Srazhenie za Zaglavak,” *Specnaz.ru*, April 30, 2013, <http://www.specnaz.ru/articles/199/21/1822.htm>.
- ⁴² Oleg Valetskiy, Yaroslav Moshkov, “Oleg Valetskiy o voynakh na Balkanakh, ikh prichinakh I o russkikh dobrovol'tsakh,” *Russkaya Narodnaya Liniya*, January 23, 2013, http://ruskline.ru/monitoring_smi/2013/01/23/oleg_valeckij_o_vojnah_na_balkanah_ih_prichinah_i_o_russkih_dobr_ovolcah/.
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- ⁴⁶ Aleksandr Boroday, Oleg Ayrapetov, Igor Strelkov, “Dobrovoltsy,” *Zavtra.ru*, February 9, 1999, <http://zavtra.ru/blogs/1999-02-096all>.
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- ⁴⁸ “Rossiyskie Chastnye Voyennye kompanii Spisok – Chastnye Voyennye Kompanii Rossii, Nayemniki Vagnera I Nazvaniya Drugikh Nayemnykh Voysk I Armii Spiskom,” *History of wars*, accessed April 2, 2019, <https://history-of-wars.ru/raznoe/rossijskie-chastnye-voennye-kompanii-spisok-chastye-voennye-kompanii-rossii-naemniki-vagnera-i-nazvaniya-drugix-naemnyx-vojsk-i-armij-spiskom.html>.
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