

JULY 2023

PRIVATE MILITARY AND SECURITY GROUPS: MAIN SUCCESSES AND FAILURES



PRIVATE MILITARY AND SECURITY GROUPS: MAIN SUCCESSES AND FAILURES

WRITTEN BY: GINEVRA BERTAMINI



WRITTEN BY

GINEVRA BERTAMINI

EDITED BY

MIGUEL ANDRES REYES CASTRO

SUPERVISED BY

PAUL DYBJER

Introduction

On Saturday 24 June 2023, Russia woke up to a military mutiny. The Wagner Group, a Russian private military organisation that has played a central role in the current Ukrainian conflict, had started marching back across the Ukrainian border into Russia (Maguire, 2023). This was announced on the Telegram channel of Wagner's leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin, while Russian channels initially did not release an official statement (Maguire, 2023). Although this could mean that Russia was trying to silence the uprising, the event did not go unnoticed by the Kremlin. In fact, as the Wagner Group took over Rostov, Russia initiated an anti-terrorism protocol (Maguire, 2023). This response can be considered appropriate when looking at the estimated military capacities of the Wagner group. In fact, the British Ministry of Defence assessed that the Wagner Group had placed around 50,000 troops in Ukraine (Ministry of Defence, 2023).

As the Wagner Group posed a significant threat to the Kremlin during the mutiny, it is relevant to consider the roles that modern Private Military and Security Companies (PMSCs) play in conflicts and the securitisation of critical resources. This Info Flash considers some of the PMSCs that have been active globally to generally review their successful and unsuccessful activities. The aim is therefore to explore the strengths and weaknesses of modern mercenary forces, and to identify the opportunities and challenges that European states might encounter in regard to PMSCs. This Info Flash will introduce some of the PMSCs to date and outline their contributions to conflicts. Therefore, this paper will summarise their main achievements and failures to provide an overview of the advantages and disadvantages that these groups provide.

PMSCs: who and what are they?

PMSCs can be understood as for-profit organisations that provide military and/or security services, ranging from training to logistics support to securitising critical infrastructure (Benicsák, 2012). This paper will consider companies that provide both military and security services, as there is no standard definition of which services are solely military or solely security related (ICRC, 2009). Traditionally, military activities are understood as, for example, participating in combat, while security activities would be more in line with guarding an asset (ICRC, 2009). However, these organisations often operate within both the security and military sectors, regardless of how they categorise themselves (ICRC, 2009). This also means that the PMSC category encompasses a large range of organisations. This implies that these organisations vary significantly from one another. It is, however, still possible to analyse these organisations together, as they often raise similar concerns (which will be outlined later in this paper) (ICRC, 2009). There are many PMSCs such as the Wagner Group, G4S, Academi and Executive Outcomes. This InfoFlash explores these PMSCs, as they have been some of the most active in recent times.

Wagner Group

The Wagner Group is based in Russia. Known for its close ties to the Russian government, it has been involved in various military operations and conflicts, notably in Ukraine, where it became notorious for supporting the 2014 annexation of Crimea (Rondeaux, 2019). Recently, it has been particularly active in Africa, where it has reportedly advanced Russian interests in the extraction of raw materials, while supporting groups to destabilise democratic actors and investing in disinformation campaigns (Rondeaux, 2019). However, as mentioned earlier, it is now mainly known for its actions in Ukraine (Rondeaux, 2019).

G4S

G4S defines itself as a multinational security services company operating in over 90 countries. With a focus on providing security solutions, the company offers a range of services such as manned guarding, security systems, cash management and risk consulting (Outlook, 2023). G4S serves diverse sectors, including government, corporate and infrastructure. The company has a large workforce and extensive global reach, making it one of the world's leading security providers (G4S, 2020). Additionally, it has been employed by a variety of international organisations such as the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS), where it operated in clearance projects in Iraq and Afghanistan (G4S, 2020).

Academi

Academi, formerly known as Blackwater, is based in the United States. Established in 1997, it gained significant attention for its involvement in the Iraq War (Outlook, 2023). Academi provided security services, training and logistical support to governments, corporations and other entities worldwide (Outlook, 2023). It has been involved in high-risk operations, including protection of personnel and infrastructure in conflict zones (Outlook, 2023). In recent years, Academi underwent restructuring, rebranding and changes in management to address criticisms (which will be described later) and enhance its operations (Outlook, 2023).

Executive Outcomes

Executive Outcomes (EO) was a renowned PMSC of the 90s that was initially dissolved in 1998 (Esau, 2020). However, its founder Eeben Barlow, a renowned South African mercenary, revived the company in 2020 (Esau, 2020). EO gained prominence for operating globally, with a focus on Africa where it protected oil facilities in Angola, trained soldiers for governments, and was involved in the civil war in Sierra Leone (Maciag, 2019). EO also conducted covert surveillance and military training in various African countries and often collaborated with UN troops (Benicsák, 2012). Barlow later established STTEP International (Specialised Tasks, Training, Equipment and Protection), also a PMSC, which worked against Boko Haram in Nigeria and is now being merged with the newly re-founded EO (Esau, 2020).

Main successes

PMSCs have had varying degrees of success in conflicts and crises ranging from Iraq to Sierra Leone. Their expertise in providing military and security services has helped stabilise volatile regions, protect critical infrastructure and support peacekeeping efforts (Warsaw Institute, 2020). In general, these organisations are considered useful through their flexibility and costs, specialised expertise and predisposition to quickly adopt technological innovation.

PMSCs offer governments and organisations a flexible and cost-efficient alternative to traditional military forces. As a result of competition between various types of military groups, they often operate on a cost-effective basis, allowing clients to access professional military capabilities without the long-term financial burdens associated with maintaining a standing military force (Joachim & Schneiker, 2012). Therefore, their ability to quickly mobilise and deploy personnel, equipment, and logistical support enables faster response times and adaptability to evolving security challenges.

For example, EO has often been mentioned when talking about its ability to quickly respond to crises (Maciąg, 2019). Essentially, they seek to adopt the most efficient deployment method to remain competitive within the PMSC market. This rapid response has also been applied to humanitarian assistance and disaster relief efforts around the world. In fact, EO has often supported UN troops in the logistical first steps of crisis responses, for example in protecting and delivering aid to the population affected by the 1995 insurgency in Sierra Leone (Maciąg, 2019). Within this specific case, EO was credited with delivering logistical capabilities and medical support, facilitating the delivery of aid, and protecting relief workers and civilians (Maciąg, 2019).

Furthermore, PMSCs have attracted skilled personnel with diverse backgrounds, including former military and law enforcement professionals (Warsaw Institute, 2020). Their expertise in fields such as intelligence, logistics, training and risk management has proven invaluable in complex security operations, like the protection of critical infrastructure in conflict areas (Benicsák, 2012). G4S and Academi have often been successful in such operations and have proven to offer clients access to a broad range of capabilities, tailoring their services to meet specific operational requirements (Benicsák, 2012). These successes can also be attributed to how PMSCs often embrace technological advancements, leveraging cutting-edge equipment and incorporating innovative approaches to security operations (Østensen & Bukkvoll, 2018). G4S claims that their adoption of new technologies enhances situational awareness, intelligence gathering, surveillance capabilities and communication systems, improving overall operational effectiveness (G4S, 2020).

Main Failures

A wide range of issues, however, have also been identified in PMSCs both in relation to their ambiguous legal status and scandals during their operations. In fact, PMSCs have often been criticised for their lack of accountability and transparency. Moreover, due to their status as private entities, they operate in a legal grey zone, making it difficult to hold them accountable for their actions.

This lack of transparency can hinder investigations into misconduct, limit the ability to assess their performance, and impede efforts to ensure compliance with international law and human rights standards (Avant & Singelman, 2010). This may have changed in the past twenty years due to the development and adoption of non-binding instruments in international humanitarian law for PMSCs as outlined in the Montreux document. It reaffirms the existing obligations of states under international law, relating to the activities of PMSCs (ICRC, 2009). However, important challenges remain. This can be seen, for example, in the Central African Republic (CAR), where the Wagner Group is legally categorised as an “unarmed force” and authorities have been reluctant to hold this organisation accountable for possible misconduct (Bodurtha, 2022). Additionally, to hold transnational PMSCs accountable, it would be required for states to collaborate extensively with one another multilaterally (Bodurtha, 2022). Previous legislation has not created the necessary instruments and possible sanctions to encourage this type of international effort (Bodurtha, 2022).

This issue might have resulted in a series of scandals that have been recorded throughout the years. For example, in 2007, personnel from Blackwater (more recently known as Academi) were involved in a shooting incident in Baghdad, Iraq, known as the Nisour Square massacre (Singer, 2007). Blackwater contractors opened fire on Iraqi civilians, resulting in the deaths of 17 people. The incident sparked international outrage and raised questions about the accountability and oversight of PMSCs (Singer, 2007).

This event was heavily covered by international media, to the point that Blackwater/Academi underwent a heavy re-staffing and re-branding campaign (Outlook, 2023). The Nisour Square massacre was not, however, the only recorded incident by PMSCs in Iraq and Afghanistan; military contractors were involved in various cases of misconduct and abuse (Alleyne, 2012). These included instances of excessive use of force, torture, and mistreatment of detainees (Alleyne, 2012). G4S was seen as a central perpetrator of these abuses, together with a range of other organisations, also outside of the Iraqi and Afghan conflicts (Alleyne, 2012).

Finally, the latest mutiny carried out by the Wagner Group could point to another concerning issue with PMSCs, namely the misplacement of loyalty of mercenary groups. This phenomenon has not been thoroughly investigated in the context of contemporary PMSCs, but it is noticeable how a leader that is able to utilise social media efficiently, such as Prigozhin, could contribute to transform a mercenary's allegiance to profit into a full-blown antagonistic feeling towards its original employer state. This case could therefore be an example of how PMSCs can become the enemies of the state that deployed them in the first place. This, of course, raises important questions regarding the reliability of PMSCs. More specifically, it could indicate that extensive use of PMSCs, as Russia has done in the war in Ukraine, could result in a serious threat for the state's security and military autonomy.

Conclusion

In conclusion, PMSCs have demonstrated both successes and failures in their involvement in conflicts and crises around the world. On the positive side, PMSCs have proven to be flexible and cost-efficient alternatives to traditional military forces. Their ability to quickly mobilise and deploy personnel, along with their expertise and adoption of technological advancements, has allowed them to stabilise volatile regions, protect critical infrastructure, and support peacekeeping efforts.

However, PMSCs also face significant challenges and criticisms. The lack of accountability and transparency due to their status as private entities has hindered investigations into misconduct, violations of international humanitarian law and limited the ability to assess their performance. Scandals, such as the Nisour Square massacre involving Blackwater contractors, have raised questions about the oversight and accountability of PMSCs. Additionally, the recent mutiny carried out by the Wagner Group in Russia highlights the potential misplacement of loyalty within mercenary groups, posing a threat to a state's security and military autonomy.

Consequently, efforts are needed to address the legal ambiguity surrounding PMSCs and establish clearer regulations to ensure compliance with international law and human rights standards. Collaboration among states is crucial to hold transnational PMSCs accountable for their actions. Stricter oversight and enforcement mechanisms can help mitigate the risks associated with PMSCs' involvement in conflicts and crises. Furthermore, it is vital to study loyalty within PMSCs, as the Wagner Group's recent development has highlighted this issue. Overall, understanding the strengths and weaknesses of PMSCs is essential for European states that may interact with such organisations in future operations.

Bibliography

Alleyne, R (2012, July 17). *G4S previous controversies*. The Daily Telegraph. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/9405046/G4S-previous-controversies.html>

Avant, D., & Sigelman, L. (2010). Private security and democracy: Lessons from the US in Iraq. *Security Studies*, 19(2), 230-265. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2010.480906>

Benicsák, P. (2012). Advantages and Disadvantages of Private Military Companies. University of Defence, 7. <https://docplayer.net/8426419-Advantages-and-disadvantages-of-private-military-companies-private-military-companies-pmc-outsourcing.html>

Bodurtha, M. (2022). An Obligation to Regulate: How Private Military Companies Embolden Conflict with Impunity from the Middle East to Central Africa. *Columbia Journal of Transnational Law*. <https://www.jtl.columbia.edu/bulletin-blog/an-obligation-to-regulate-how-private-military-companies-embolden-conflict-with-impunity-from-the-middle-east-to-central-africa>

Esau, I. (2020, December 20). *Africa awaits: Mercenary outfit Executive Outcomes is reborn*. Upstream. <https://www.upstreamonline.com/people/africa-awaits-mercenary-outfit-executive-outcomes-is-reborn/2-1-921836>

G4S (2020). *Annual Report*. G4S. <https://www.g4s.com/what-we-do/security-services>

International Committee of the Red Cross (2009). *The montreux document on pertinent international legal obligations and good practices for states related to operations of private military and security companies during armed conflict*. http://www.icrc.org/eng/assets/files/other/icrc_002_0996.pdf.

Joachim, J., & Schneiker, A. (2012). New humanitarians? Frame appropriation through private military and security companies. *Millennium*, 40(2), 365-388. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829811425890>

Maciąg, M. (2019). Engagement of Executive Outcomes in Sierra Leone – utility assessment. *Security and Defence Quarterly*, 27(5), 57-71. <https://doi.org/10.35467/sdq/112110>

Maguire, D. (2023, June 25). *What happened in Russia? Here's how the Wagner Group's mutiny unfolded over the weekend*. ABC NEWS. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-06-26/what-is-the-wagner-group-russia-mutiny-yevgeny-prigozhin-/102521218>

Ministry of Defence (2023, January 20). Wagner almost certainly now commands up to 50,000 fighters in Ukraine. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/DefenceHQ/status/1616324451619979265?lang=en>

Østensen, Å. G., & Bukkvoll, T. (2018). Russian use of private military and security companies-the implications for European and Norwegian Security [FFI Rapport 18/01300]. CHR Michelsens Institut. <https://www.cmi.no/publications/6637-russian-use-of-private-military-and-security>

Outlook. (2023, June 28). Mercenary Group: A Look At 5 Big, Elite Private, Security Forces in The World. Outlook. <https://www.outlookindia.com/international/mercenary-group-a-look-at-5-big-elite-private-sevurity-forces-in-the-world-news-298362>

Rondeaux, C. (2019, November 7). Decoding the Wagner Group: Analyzing the role of private military security contractors in Russian proxy warfare. New America. <https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/reports/decoding-wagner-group-analyzing-role-private-military-security-contractors-russian-proxy-warfare/>

Singer, P. W. (2012, October 2). The Dark Truth about Blackwater. Brookings. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-dark-truth-about-blackwater/>

Warsaw Institute (2020, August 20). The Awakening Of Private Military Companies. Warsaw Institute. <https://warsawinstitute.org/awakening-private-military-companies/>