

THE ROLE OF THE WAGNER GROUP IN AFRICAN CIVIL WAR

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This past week on July 31st, three Russian journalists were found murdered in a remote area near Sibut, Central African Republic. As if the circumstances for their being there were not suspicious enough, the official statements from multiple sources is indicative of a much larger-scale cover-up between the United Nations, the Central African Republic and the home country of the journalists, Russia. What the journalists were in the process of exposing was the planned resumption and escalation of a civil war where billions in potential revenue remain at stake.

The existence of the Wagner Group or mercenaries in general is denied in official Russian circles (Deutsche Welle, 2018a). Reportedly owned by billionaire restaurateur Yevgeny Prigozhin (known as ‘Putin’s chef’) (Halpin and Kravchenko, 2018) (Moscow Times, 2018), their origins started with fighting in the Ukraine before migrating to Syria. What was not well known was their presence in Africa. Estimates of Wagner Group members vary between 1,350 and 2,000. To film their documentary on the Wagner Group, the journalists did not notify the Russian Government of their intentions before going or after their arrival last week (Al Jazeera, 2018) (Deutsche Welle, 2018a) (Bensimon and Vikine, 2018) (Halpin and Kravchenko, 2018).

Instead they met a contact at the UN Mission (MINUSCA) (Dozhd, 2018a) or so they thought. As the story goes, they departed the UN Mission and made it to the Wagner Group’s encampment at Berengo but were refused entry until they notified the host government and registered their press credentials with the Defense Ministry (Deutsche Welle, 2018a) (Halpin and Kravchenko, 2018). This meant traveling back to the capital city. It is on their way back when around 7pm, near the town of Sibut, they are kidnapped by approximately 10 turbaned men speaking Arabic (Deutsche Welle, 2018a). The same local government official who said they were kidnapped then contradicted himself by saying they were killed on the spot. Somehow the

driver was able to escape the hail of bullets (Al Jazeera, 2018) (Deutsche Welle, 2018a) (Kommersarant, 2018). In turn the UN has denied the existence of the person at their mission (Dozhd, 2018a) (Dozhd, 2018b). Furthermore, the UN Mission (MINUSCA) claims that the area in question is regularly patrolled by the 14,000-strong UN presence as well as the locals (Bensimon and Vitkine, 2018) (Deutsche Welle, 2018b).

To say this raises a number of issues is an understatement. First, the group of journalists were working on behalf of Mikhail Khodorkovsky (Deutsche Welle, 2018a) – a nemesis of Yevgeny Prigozhin. Also a billionaire, some Western sympathy exists for former Yukos Oil CEO Khodorkovsky since he was jailed by Putin for a number of years (Little, 2012) before being freed (Deutsche Welle, 2018a). Khodorkovsky runs the website ‘The Dossier Center’ which is focused on exposing Russian corruption and the oligarchs that have remained close to Putin (Al Jazeera, 2018). Prigozhin fits that description. Since 2016, Prigozhin is under U.S. sanctions for the activities of the Wagner Group in the Ukraine as well as being named in an indictment this year by the Mueller investigation for election tampering in the United States (Moscow Time, 2018).

Second, the investigation to expose the dealings of Prigozhin and the Wagner Group had not gone without consequences before last week. Another journalist for Khodorkovsky covered the Wagner Group’s exploits in Syria. Last February, U.S. forces killed approximately 200-300 Wagner Group personnel as they closed on their position (NY Times, 2018). By April, the journalist died by falling from his own fifth floor balcony in Yekaterinburg (Brown, 2018). Given these circumstances, the behavior of Khodorkovsky is puzzling. Not only was he aware of what could befall the journalists, he knew what had happened to fellow elite exiles who had proven themselves intolerable. In the United Kingdom alone, Berezovsky was found strangled and Litvinenko was poisoned. At the same time the Skirpals were poisoned, Berezovsky protégé Nikolai Glushkov was found dead in his London home (Harding and Bowcott, 2018).

Third, what could be so important about Africa that would draw the attention of Prigozhin and the Wagner Group? For trading weapons and providing advisors under a fragile civil war setting, Russia gains access to the most coveted natural resources on earth: Diamonds, gold, uranium and number of other minerals (Kommersant, 2014) (Azo, 2018). For rulers to enjoy unfettered access to the minerals and maintain their own power, the Russians provide the one type of resource they possess in abundance: Arms and soldiers. This became possible because in 2013, the UN exempted Russia from an arms embargo to the Central African Republic. President Faustin-Archange Touadera’s bodyguards were replaced with a Russian security detail (Deutsche Welle, 2018a) (Halpin and Kravchenko, 2018).

The exact same could be said of the Central African Republic’s neighbor, the Democratic Republic of the Congo. As early as 1999, Moscow had agreed to equip and train the Congolese Army but had not acted upon it until recently. President Kabila’s situation is tenuous having twice postponed elections. After the assassination of his father in 2001, this second Kabila regime is known for inequality and corruption. With the human rights acquittal and return of his rival Bemba, the deadline for Bemba to file to run as a candidate for the Presidency is August 8 this week (Agence France Press, 2018) (Deutsche Welle, 2018b).

Another Prigozhin interest is the Sudan under a parent company *M Invest* and a subsidiary *Meroe Gold* (Moscow Times, 2018). This translates to three of the largest countries cutting through the heart of Africa. The practice of Mergers and Acquisitions (M&A) as well as equity swaps between global and regional mining conglomerates means that Prigozhin, despite international sanctions, enjoys unlimited options to realize a profit without a single shovel going into the dirt (RusLetter, 2018).

If we wonder how this might turn out, we only need to glimpse into the past. According to the Associated Press, a Syrian state oil company had offered a Wagner front company a cut of the profits from refineries liberated from the Islamic State (Taylor, 2018). With a considerable investment not yet coming to full fruition in Syria, the prognosis for Africans caught in escalating conflict does not bode well indeed.

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