Active Measures in the Global South:

Soviet and Russian Irregular Warfare Strategy in Africa and the Middle East

A senior thesis presented

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Abstract

This thesis examines the historical evolution of Soviet and Russian proxy warfare operations in Africa and the Middle East from the late Cold War to the present. After a brief introduction, this thesis provides an overview of how Russian semi-state paramilitary forces have evolved since the collapse of the Soviet Union and offers two pairs of case study comparisons. The first pairing examines the parallels between the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989 and the Russian intervention in Syria from 2015 to 2024, and the second compares the Soviet Union's involvement in the Angolan Civil War between 1975 and 1988 to the ongoing Russian engagement in Libya. This paper concludes that the Soviet proxy warfare strategy in Angola in effect served as an early prototype for contemporary Russian efforts in places like Syria and Libya, which have employed semi-state paramilitary organizations like the Wagner Group in place of Cuban, East German, and North Korean proxies.

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Introduction

On June 24, 2023, mercenaries from the Wagner Group staged an uprising in southern Russia that resulted in the deaths of two Wagner fighters and twenty-nine Russian Air Force personnel. While Yevgeny Prigozhin, head of the Wagner Group, and Russian President Vladimir Putin were able to negotiate a ceasefire through Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko, the June 2023 uprising and Prigozhin's subsequent death raised serious questions about Russia's reliance on private military companies.[1] How did an organization like the Wagner Group come to play such a vital role in Russian military operations? To fully understand the scope and dangers of Russia's present strategy using semi-state paramilitaries and private military and security companies (PMSCs), however, it is essential to acknowledge and analyze its parallels with proxy warfare during the Soviet period. Therefore, this paper seeks to address the following: What are the similarities and differences between Brezhnev and Putin-era military operations in the Global South, and how can the answer to that question be used to better inform American efforts in countering Russian aggression moving forward?

A comparison between contemporary Russian PMSC activity and Soviet operations in the Global South is important for several reasons. First, Putin's fascination with the past and his background in the Committee for State Security (KGB) remains a powerful influence in contemporary Russian politics. Kevin Riehle, a former counterintelligence analyst with tours in the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and

[1] "Wagner Boss Prigozhin Confirmed Dead in Plane Crash," *BBC*, August 27, 2023, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-66632924.

Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), describes in his book *Russian Intelligence: A Case-Based Study of Russian Services and Missions Past and Present* the *chekist* (a term used to refer to members of the *Cheka*, the first Soviet secret police agency, as well as its successors) mindset as "constantly perceiving threats and seeking ways to mitigate them…[and] constantly looking for, and sometimes fabricating, a connection between domestic threats and foreign enemies."[2] It is unsurprising, then, that Putin and his inner circle of *siloviki* have repeated their Soviet predecessors' method of checking Western influence abroad and pursuing their strategic objectives using similarly subversive operations. At the same time, while the USSR sought to promote socialism and exert influence by supplying military advisors and arms, contemporary Russia has modified this strategy, replacing military units with semi-state actors to increase their scope while maintaining plausible deniability.

During the Soviet period, the USSR focused its foreign policy efforts on the Global South, seeking to promote socialist ideology and to create an international environment amenable to Soviet aims. Over time, this strategy became increasingly militaristic, and the USSR provided 19,000 military advisors between 1974 and 1984 to burgeoning socialist regimes in the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and throughout Africa.[3] To maintain their secrecy, the majority of the advisors involved in such operations came

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[2] Kevin P. Riehle, *Russian Intelligence: A Case-Based Study of Russian Services and Missions Past and Present* (National Intelligence Press, 2022), 70.

[3] Yuri Krasin, "The USSR and the Third World: A Historical Perspective," in *Russia and the Third World in the Post-Soviet Era*, ed. Mohiaddin Mesbahi (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1994), 113–114, https://upf.com/book.asp?id=9780813012704; "The Soviet Military Advisory and Training Program for The Third World: A Research Paper" (Langley, VA: Directorate of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, April 1984), https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000497180.pdf.

from the KGB and the Defense Ministry's Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU), and these agencies represented one of the USSR's most powerful weapons against the West in the Global South. Following the USSR's collapse, however, the Russian security state's global influence waned, and the security services' missions in Southeast Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) became a thing of the past. Contemporary Russian security services like the GRU, the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), and the Federal Security Service (FSB) focus their attention on assassinations, cyberattacks, and other covert operations rather than training and advising foreign forces.[4] Putin's Russia has nonetheless repeated the Soviet strategy of shaping the Global South with covert military forces, albeit this time with PMSCs and paramilitary organizations instead of military units themselves.

Analysis of Russian and Soviet covert action in the Global South can also shed light on how both regimes have perceived their roles in the bipolar—and now multipolar—international environment. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union used *spetsnaz* special forces units from the KGB and GRU intelligence services to provide military support to socialist revolutions and challenge Western-aligned regimes in developing nations.[5] Today, Russia pursues a more nuanced approach, though its underlying goals remain similar; while it can no longer ideologically justify these covert

[4] Riehle, *Russian Intelligence*, 108–109.

[5] Mark Galeotti, "Spetsnaz: Operational Intelligence, Political Warfare, and Battlefield Role," George C. Marshall European Center For Security Studies, February 2020, https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/security-insights/spetsnaz-operational-intelligence-political-warfare-and-battlefield-role-0; Jade McGlynn, "Why Russia Markets Itself as an Anti-Colonial Power to Africans," *Foreign Policy*, November 15, 2024, https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/02/08/russia-ukraine-colonialism-diplomacy-africa/.

actions with the goal of spreading communism, Russia continues to utilize active measures, a term used to describe espionage, propaganda, assassination, and other forms of political warfare, to undermine Western interests, destabilize regional alliances, and project power globally. In addition to PMSCs like Wagner, this strategy often involves support for nationalist and populist movements, information warfare, and cyberattacks.[6] By capitalizing on existing grievances and exploiting societal divisions, Russia seeks to shape the international landscape in its favor.

Wagner's role in advancing Russian foreign policy is not unique in modern Russian history, nor in international military history. Countless other countries have used PMSCs in pursuit of their foreign policy goals: The United States and its allies made repeated use of PMSCs in Iraq and Afghanistan, and PMSC personnel at times outnumbered those from the military by three to one.[7] The CIA was particularly prolific in its collaboration with PMSCs, and expanded its contracts with the American company Blackwater to involve that organization's personnel in the agency's most sensitive covert operations, including Predator drone targeting and "snatch and grab" raids.[8] The United Kingdom, France, and other NATO allies have called upon PMSCs to assist their

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[6] Riehle, *Russian Intelligence*, 106–108.

[7] Micah Zenko, "The New Unknown Soldiers of Afghanistan and Iraq," *Foreign Policy*, May 29, 2015, https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/05/29/the-new-unknown-soldiers-of-afghanistan-and-iraq/.

[8] Mark Mazzetti, "Blackwater Loses a Job for the C.I.A.," *The New York Times*, December 12, 2009, sec. U.S., https://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/12/us/politics/12blackwater.html.

missions abroad as well.[9] However, the United States has never conducted foreign policy missions using exclusively PMSC personnel, and PMSCs like Blackwater are used only in a supporting role. Wagner, unlike traditional PMSCs, has operated as a representative for the Russian state around the world, working to advance its foreign policy goals with comparatively minimal oversight.[10]

Beyond the realm of military strategy, a comparison of Soviet and Russian proxy warfare operations past and present helps to illuminate the current state of Russian politics, particularly the prevailing idolization of the past among Russian elites. Vladimir Putin and his inner circle frequently cite Soviet and Imperial Russian history as precedent for current policy, and nostalgia for Soviet hegemony—and the trauma that followed its collapse—remains a powerful motivator in Russian foreign policy.[11] While it remains unclear exactly how this nostalgia figures into Putin's and other senior leaders' decision-making process, the Soviet period and its rose-colored achievements have undoubtedly sustained great influence on modern Russia, including those past missions in the Global South to support socialist revolutions and bolster the USSR's international

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[9] Elke Krahmann and Cornelius Friesendorf, "The Role of Private Security Companies (PSCs) in CSDP Missions and Operations" (Directorate-General for External Policies of the Union, European Parliament, April 12, 2011), 16–17, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EXPO-SEDE_ET(2011)433829.

[10] Åse Gilje Østensen and Tor Bukkvoll, "Private Military Companies – Russian Great Power Politics on the Cheap?," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 33, no. 1–2 (February 17, 2022): 134, https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2021.1984709.

[11] Eugene Rumer, "Russia's Wartime Foreign Policy: Regional Hegemony in Question" (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, August 17, 2023), 3–4.

influence. Therefore, the parallels between Russian and Soviet covert actions that this paper identifies indicate a greater Russian effort to return to past regimes' global reach.

Given the secretive nature of the Soviet and Russian military operations that this paper seeks to analyze, sourcing accurate information about them poses a distinct challenge. Several resources have proven vital in piecing together this puzzle. First, declassified materials from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and other intelligence organizations offer a contemporary perspective into the Soviet Union's actions abroad and shed light on how senior U.S. national security officials perceived this threat. Second, seminal literature on the Soviet intelligence and security services like *The Mitrokhin Archive II: The KGB and the World* by Christopher Andrew, as well as more recent works by Jonathan Haslam, Mark Galeotti, and Sergey Sukhankin provide a comprehensive archive of the Soviet Union's intelligence apparatus and its actions abroad. Third, anthologies like Mohiaddin's *Russia and the Third World in the Post-Soviet Era* and Radoslav A. Yordanov's *The Soviet Union and the Horn of Africa during the Cold War* will provide the necessary ideological and theoretical foundation for the events covered in this paper. Fourth and finally, meticulous investigative journalism and open-source intelligence analysis by John Lechner, Candace Rondeaux, and Bellingcat have made tracking the Wagner Group and its contemporaries possible.

The goal of this thesis is to provide a historical comparison between Soviet and Russian covert activity in the Global South. Russia's present strategy using PMSCs to

exert influence abroad and the risks it presents cannot be fully understood without first acknowledging the precedent that GRU and KGB actions established during the Soviet period. Semi-state paramilitaries and PMSCs have come to play an exceedingly vital role in executing Russian foreign policy, and the history of this approach—of both individual organizations and the political, cultural, and ideological context in which they operate—must be understood to make sense of Russia's current approach in the Global South. Case studies of Soviet activity in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East will demonstrate that the Russian Federation's current efforts in these same regions have sustained a similar strategy, eschewing Socialist ideology while still seeking to undermine Western influence. This thesis seeks to outline the key similarities and differences between the Soviet and Russian governments' use of covert military action to advance their foreign policy goals in the Global South. Historical analysis will demonstrate that the current Russian strategy using PMSCs throughout the Global South is not something to be overlooked or overestimated, and can provide policymakers, researchers, and security professionals with invaluable insights into the current state of Russian foreign policy.

Chapter 1: The Evolution of Semi-State Russian Paramilitary Forces

Following Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in March of 2014, a new organization emerged as one of Vladimir Putin's most secretive—and most fearsome—instruments of war. Founded by former GRU officer Dmitry Utkin, the Wagner Group has become a prime example of Russian covert military operations abroad.[12] Over the course of a decade, the Wagner Group empowered Putin to expand the Russian Federation's influence abroad, particularly in Africa and the Middle East, and to secure key regional footholds, natural resources, and revenue streams for his increasingly isolated regime. While the Wagner Group has played a vital role supporting the Russian military's operations in Ukraine and Syria, it has also operated as an independent fighting force, providing training, security, and combatants throughout Africa and expanding the Russian Federation's armed presence abroad while maintaining a low profile.

Though the Wagner Group has in some respects become synonymous with Russian paramilitary forces and PMSCs, it is important to note that it is hardly novel: Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, a number of Russian security contractors, PMSCs, and paramilitary organizations have operated abroad, albeit with far less autonomy and never engaging in combat.[13] Organizations like RSB Group, Anti-Terror Orel, and Moran Security Group were among the first to materialize in the 1990s, with veterans of Russia's military and intelligence communities seeking new

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[12] Kimberly Marten, "Russia's Use of Semi-State Security Forces: The Case of the Wagner Group," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 35, no. 3 (May 4, 2019): 193, https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2019.1591142.

[13] Tracey German, "The Evolution of Russia's Use of Private Military Companies as Instruments of State Power" (Stuttgart, Germany: Russia Strategic Initiative, U.S. European Command, n.d.), 16.

opportunities amidst Yeltsin's chaotic economy.[14] However, these organizations more closely resembled the western PMSC model, and operated on behalf of state-owned enterprises and oligarchs rather than the Russian security services themselves.[15] Analysis of overlapping personnel and lineages among early Russian PMSCs, the Wagner Group, and its contemporaries, therefore, can shed light on modern Russian paramilitary forces' structure, capabilities, and identity.

Years before the Wagner Group was created, PMSCs provided security to Russian shipping and energy companies like Gazprom, Rostec, and Sovcomflot with *spetsnaz* veterans from throughout the FSB, GRU, Ministry of Defense (MoD), and the Ministry of the Interior (MVD), particularly the "Alpha," "Vityaz," and "Vympel" counter-terror units.[16] Among the first of these PMSCs was Anti-Terror Orel, which was founded in 1998 by Sergey Epishkin, a veteran from the KGB (and later FSB) unit "Vympel."[17] Anti-Terror Orel got its start conducting security and explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) operations in Iraq, alongside two affiliated PMSCs, Anti-Terror Redut and TigrTop Rent,

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[14] Candace Rondeaux, "Decoding the Wagner Group: Analyzing the Role of Private Military Security Contractors in Russian Proxy Warfare" (New America, November 7, 2019), 34–41, https://www.newamerica.org/future-security/reports/decoding-wagner-group-analyzing-role-private-military-security-contractors-russian-proxy-warfare/.

[15] Ibid, 32–33.

[16] Ibid, 28, 33.

[17] Rondeaux, "Decoding the Wagner Group," 33; German, "Evolution of Russia's Use of Private Military Companies," 17.

though it later rebranded as RusCorp in 2007.[18] Similarly in 2005, former FSB reserve officer Oleg Krinitsyn founded RSB Group, a self-branded "private military consulting company" capable of providing armed protection, intelligence, and mine clearing.[19] RSB Group prides itself on hiring exclusively intelligence and military veterans: Krinitsyn himself stated in a rare interview with *RBK* that "veterans of Vympel and Alpha…are our priority."[20] Finally, there is the Moran Security Group: Founded by former KGB officer Vyacheslav Kalashnikov, Moran was among the first to enter the private security industry in the 1990s, and specializes in anti-piracy and maritime security.[21] But after the Nigerian Navy arrested 15 Moran employees in October 2012 for weapons smuggling, former Moran directors Vadim Gusev—also a veteran of RusCorp—and Yevgeny Sidorov founded the Slavonic Corps, a rebranded subsidiary of Moran.[22]

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[18] Sergey Sukhankin, "From 'Volunteers' to Quasi-PMCs: Retracing the Footprints of Russian Irregulars in the Yugoslav Wars and Post-Soviet Conflicts," Jamestown Foundation, June 25, 2019, https://jamestown.org/program/from-volunteers-to-quasi-pmcs-retracing-the-footprints-of-russian-irregulars-in-the-yugoslav-wars-and-post-soviet-conflicts/; Rondeaux, "Decoding the Wagner Group," 37.

[19] German, "The Evolution of Russia's Use of Private Military Companies as Instruments of State Power," 16–17; "U.S. Treasury Sanctions Nearly 100 Targets in Putin's War Machine, Prohibits Russian Gold Imports," U.S. Department of the Treasury, June 28, 2022, https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0838.

[20] "Глава ЧВК Рассказал о Работе Российских Специалистов в Ливии," РБК, March 13, 2017, https://www.rbc.ru/politics/13/03/2017/58c69ef59a7947e8a7c2ea63.

[21] Rondeaux, "Decoding the Wagner Group," 41–42; Sukhankin, "From 'Volunteers' to Quasi-PMCs: Retracing the Footprints of Russian Irregulars in the Yugoslav Wars and Post-Soviet Conflicts."

[22] Huseyin Oylupinar, "Wagging 'Wagner': Genesis of a Russian Private Military Security Contractor," Turkish Foreign Policy Institute, March 10, 2022, https://foreignpolicy.org.tr/wagging-wagner-genesis-of-a-russian-private-military-security-contractor/; Sergey Sukhankin, "Russian PMCs in the Syrian Civil War: From Slavonic Corps to Wagner Group and Beyond," Jamestown Foundation, December 18, 2019, https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep51450.

The Slavonic Corps brand was short-lived. Following a request from the Syrian Ministry of Petroleum and Mineral Resources for "specialists" to protect oil production, transportation, and refining facilities, the Slavonic Corps deployed 267 men to a base in Latakia, Syria.[23] Shortly after arriving in Syria, the contractors were divided into two groups, one with former GRU officer Dmitry Utkin in command, and began protecting oil facilities in Deir ez-Zor.[24] But poor communication and planning doomed their mission from the start, as Moran personnel could not coordinate their efforts with Syrian counterparts and were not informed of anti-al-Assad forces' large presence in the region.[25] After a brief but brutal engagement near al-Sukhnah, the Slavonic Corps returned to Russia, where Gusev and Sidorov were promptly arrested and charged with illegal mercenarism by the FSB.[26]

Shortly after returning to Russia, Dmitry Utkin and two-thirds of the original Slavonic Corps contingent rebranded into the now-infamous Wagner Group, which began conducting increasingly offensive missions in Syria alongside Moran, Patriot, and Vega, two more PMSCs with close ties to the *spetsnaz* community but lacking Wagner's combat

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[23] Ирек Муртазин, "Первый и последний бой «Славянского корпуса». Что известно о россиянах, попавших в плен в Сирии, и при чем тут «кремлевский повар» Евгений Пригожин," *Новая газета*, October 5, 2017, https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2017/10/05/74081-pervyy-i-posledniy-boy-slavyanskogo-korpusa; Сергей Хазов-Кассиа, "Проект 'Мясорубка'. Рассказывают три командира ЧВК Вагнера," *Радио Свобода*, March 7, 2018, sec. Сирия, https://www.svoboda.org/a/29084090.html.

[24] Sukhankin, "Russian PMCs in the Syrian Civil War."

[25] Ibid.

[26] Michael Weiss, "The Case of the Keystone Cossacks," *Foreign Policy* (blog), January 9, 2025, https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/11/21/the-case-of-the-keystone-cossacks/; Rondeaux, "Decoding the Wagner Group," 45.

capabilities.[27] Wagner and its peers also began providing security details for Russian state-owned energy companies like Stroytransgaz and Technopromexport, as well as training for indigenous Syrian forces like the "ISIS Hunters," Liwa al-Quds, and the 4th Assault Corps.[28] Around this same time, Wagner began deploying troops in Ukraine's Donbas, and approximately 2,500 to 3,000 contractors assisted Russian military and GRU-affiliated units in annexing the Crimean peninsula.[29]

Despite its operational failure, the Slavonic Corps set an important precedent for Russia and its use of state-sponsored proxy forces like the Wagner Group. Russia's direct military intervention in Syria and annexation of Crimea provided the Wagner Group with ideal opportunities to prove its worth as a proxy force capable of supporting strategic objectives abroad. Other analyses of the Wagner Group have cited "plausible deniability" as an explanation for its involvement in Russian foreign interventions around 2014–2015.[30] However, the Russian government's decision to begin using Wagner and other similar organizations for its covert operations abroad should be attributed to their

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[27] Oylupinar, "Wagging 'Wagner'"; Rondeaux, "Decoding the Wagner Group," 49.

[28] Rondeaux, "Decoding the Wagner Group," 49–50.

[29] Андрей Шароградский, Александр Гостев, and Марк Крутов, "Сирийские потери 'Славянского корпуса,'" *Радио Свобода*, 16:07:04Z, sec. Сирия, https://www.svoboda.org/a/27642396.html; Oylupinar, "Wagging 'Wagner.'"

[30] András Rácz, "Band of Brothers: The Wagner Group and the Russian State," *Center for Strategic & International Studies* (blog), September 21, 2020, https://www.csis.org/blogs/post-soviet-post/band-brothers-wagner-group-and-russian-state; Federica Saini Fasanotti, "Russia's Wagner Group in Africa: Influence, Commercial Concessions, Rights Violations, and Counterinsurgency Failure," *Brookings* (blog), February 8, 2022, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/russias-wagner-group-in-africa-influence-commercial-concessions-rights-violations-and-counterinsurgency-failure/.

legal and financial flexibility—that is, their independence from MoD budgets and both national and international law—rather than the absolute secrecy of their involvement.[31] Note that while the Wagner Group never conducted truly covert or "black" operations, it did enable the Russian government to conceal casualties from the public after devastating attacks in Mali and Syria.[32]

PMSCs are illegal under the Russian constitution, and lack a clearly defined status under international law as well, so their participation in foreign conflicts does not present the same public risk to Russian leadership as that of the Armed Forces.[33] It is also worth noting that the Russian Federation chose not to sign the Montreux Accords, an international agreement on the use of private military and security companies in war zones, in September 2008.[34] Putin himself even went on record to state that "if Wagner…[doesn't] break Russian laws, they can carry out their business anywhere in the

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[31] Paul Stronski, "Implausible Deniability: Russia's Private Military Companies," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 2, 2020, https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2020/06/implausible-deniability-russias-private-military-companies?lang=en.

[32] Marten, "Russia's Use of Semi-State Security Forces," 194–195; Christiaan Triebert et al., "How Wagner's Ruthless Image Crumbled in Mali," *The New York Times*, November 1, 2024, sec. World, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/01/world/africa/russia-wagner-mercenaries-mali.html.

[33] Konstitutsiya Rossiiskoi Federatsii [Konst. RF] [Constitution] art. 13.5 (Russ.).

[34] "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" (International Committee of the Red Cross, September 17, 2008), https://www.montreuxdocument.org/pdf/document/en.pdf, 9; Adam Aliano, "Is Russia Exploiting a Gap in the Montreux Convention?," *Lawfare Media* (blog), June 14, 2022, https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/russia-exploiting-gap-montreux-convention.

world" in December 2018, effectively endorsing the group's operations abroad.[35] That gray-area status is, indeed, a strength: While the Wagner Group later grew far closer to the MoD and GRU, the catalyst for its involvement in Syria and Ukraine was its flexibility, not its stealth.[36]

In the years following Russia's annexation of Crimea, the Wagner Group substantially expanded its international operations. By 2016, between 2,000 and 2,500 Wagner forces were operating as "elite infantry" in Syria, helping al-Assad-aligned forces recapture the city of Palmyra from the Islamic State (IS).[37] Around this same time, Utkin received the Order of Courage at a Kremlin reception alongside Andrei Troshev, a former colonel in the Interior Ministry (MVD) and mercenary with ties to Moran and Wagner, and was replaced by Konstantin Pikalov, a former officer in the experimental MoD unit 99795, soon thereafter.[38] Wagner continued to play an important role in Russia's intervention in Syria even after the majority of its fighters left the country in the summer of 2016, with a small contingent of specialists remaining in the country under a Ministry of Energy contract.[39]

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[35] Лиана Фаизова, "Кудрин, повар, ЧВК Вагнера, женитьба: что важного и странного сказал Путин на пресс-конференции," The Bell, December 20, 2018, https://thebell.io/kudrin-povar-chvk-vagnera-zhenitba-chto-vazhnogo-i-strannogo-skazal-putin-na-press-konferentsii.

[36] Marten, "Russia's Use of Semi-State Security Forces," 187.

[37] Ibid, 193.

[38] "Putin Chef's Kisses of Death: Russia's Shadow Army's State-Run Structure Exposed," bellingcat, August 14, 2020, https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2020/08/14/pmc-structure-exposed/; Oylupinar, "Wagging 'Wagner.'"

[39] Marten, "Russia's Use of Semi-State Security Forces," 194.

Wagner operations in Syria continued until February 7, 2018, when a group of Wagner and Syrian forces crossed an internal deconfliction zone border in eastern Syria—a zone that had been agreed upon by American and Russian forces three years earlier—and attacked a U.S.-backed Kurdish military base by a Conoco gas plant in Deir-el-Zour.[40] However, Russian authorities repeatedly assured their American counterparts that no Russian troops were present in the attacking force, choosing not to prevent retaliatory strikes by American air and ground forces.[41] By the end of what later became known as the Battle of Khasham, the combined Wagner-SAF suffered several hundred losses.[42] The battle represents a decisive moment in the Wagner Group's relationship with the Russian state, as the Wagner Group trained, advised, and assisted the Tiger Forces militia and the Syrian 5th Assault Corps in eastern Syria as they launched offensives against ISIS alongside a combination of forces from the Russian Special Operations Forces Command (KSSO) and GRU.[43]

After the Deir-el-Zour massacre, Wagner steadily increased its presence in Africa, and began providing training, security, and offensive services to the Central African

[40] Marten, "Russia's Use of Semi-State Security Forces," 194.

[41] Sukhankin, "Russian PMCs in the Syrian Civil War."

[42] Maria Tsvetkova, "Insight - Russian Toll in Syria Battle Was 300 Killed and Wounded: Sources," *Reuters*, February 16, 2018, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-casualtie-idUSKCN1FZ2DZ/.

[43] "Moscow's War in Syria," CSIS Transnational Threats Project (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2020), 33, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/Jones_MoscowsWarinSyria_WEB_update.pdf.

Republic (CAR), Libya, Mali, Mozambique, and Sudan through contracts brokered by the MoD and GRU.[44] In November and December of 2017, Wagner and Wagner-affiliated forces began arriving in Sudan and the CAR alongside Russian military personnel, where they trained indigenous troops and guarded mining facilities in exchange for diamond and gold mining concessions.[45] After Yevgeny Prigozhin met with Khalifa Haftar in November 2018, Wagner forces began appearing in Libya, where they participated in the Libyan National Army's (LNA) offensive against the UN-backed government in Tripoli, and in 2021, another contingent arrived in Mali after French forces began their withdrawal.[46] The UK Ministry of Defence estimates that Wagner deployed as many as 5,000 operatives across Africa in 2022, and while Wagner secured the majority of its contracts in Africa independently, these ventures were always sanctioned by the Kremlin.[47] By 2022, Wagner had become closely linked to the MoD and the GRU, and Prigozhin's network of businesses enabled the Russian government to increase its operations and influence abroad while avoiding formal intervention.[48]

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[44] German, "Evolution of Russia's Use of Private Military Companies," 19–21.

[45] Elena Pokalova, "The Wagner Group in Africa: Russia's Quasi-State Agent of Influence," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, June 2, 2023, 9–13, https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2023.2231642.

[46] Pokalova, "The Wagner Group in Africa," 6–7, 14–15; "Supposed 'Troll Factory' Founder and Mercenary Kingpin Attends Talks between Russia's Defense Minister and the Head of the Libyan National Army," *Meduza*, November 9, 2018, https://meduza.io/en/news/2018/11/10/supposed-troll-factory-founder-and-mercenary-kingpin-attends-talks-between-russia-s-defense-minister-and-the-head-of-the-libyan-national-army.

[47] German, 21–22.

[48] "Putin Chef's Kisses of Death."

Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Wagner forces began supplementing the faltering MoD offensive in that country in addition to its ongoing operations throughout Africa. By March, Wagner tripled the number of its fighters in Ukraine to more than 1,000, who then saw combat during the Donetsk offensive.[49] As the war progressed, the Wagner Group's responsibilities shifted, and it began recruiting scores of prisoners from Russia's prison system in place of skilled mercenaries.[50] Yet inadequate equipment and training resulted in high casualties among Wagner's recruited convicts during the battles of Bakhmut and Soledar.[51]

In the winter and spring of 2023, Wagner's already-rocky relationship with the MoD became untenable: Yevgeny Prigozhin repeatedly accused officials like Russian Minister of Defence Sergei Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov of withholding critical supplies to Wagner forces.[52] The MoD and Wagner began quarreling as early as 2017, when Prigozhin and MoD officials accused each other of committing embezzlement and withholding payments.[53] This rift grew until Prigozhin and Wagner

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[49] Eric Schmitt, "More Russian Mercenaries Deploying to Ukraine to Take On Greater Role in War," *The New York Times*, March 25, 2022, sec. U.S., https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/25/us/politics/russian-mercenaries-ukraine-wagner-group.html.

[50] Anatoly Kurmanaev et al., "A Prison at War: The Convicts Sustaining Putin's Invasion," *The New York Times*, December 4, 2023, sec. World, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/04/world/europe/russia-prison-wagner-ukraine.html.

[51] Joshua Yaffa, "Inside the Wagner Group's Armed Uprising," *The New Yorker*, July 31, 2023, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/08/07/inside-the-wagner-uprising.

[52] Paul Sonne and Anatoly Kurmanaev, "His Glory Fading, a Russian Warlord Took One Last Stab at Power," *The New York Times*, June 27, 2023, sec. World, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/27/world/europe/prigozhin-wagner-russia-putin.html.

[53] Kimberly Marten, "Whither Wagner? The Consequences of Prigozhin's Mutiny and Demise," *Survival* 65, no. 5 (September 3, 2023): 45–64, https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2023.2261245, 46–47.

fighters staged an uprising on June 24, 2023, quickly capturing the city of Rostov-on-Don and advancing toward Moscow before reaching a compromise where charges against Prigozhin would be dropped and Wagner forces could relocate to neighboring Belarus.[54] The so-called compromise was short-lived: Prigozhin, Utkin, and other Wagner leadership were killed in a plane crash over the Tver Oblast a month later when Nikolai Patrushev, a close ally of Putin's and former secretary of the Security Council of Russia, had an explosive placed on the wing of their plane.[55]

Following the deaths of Wagner's senior leadership, the MoD founded the Africa Corps, a GRU-controlled paramilitary intended to absorb Wagner's operations throughout the continent.[56] To avoid and discourage future insubordination, the Russian government decided to separate responsibility for the business, propaganda, and military elements of the former Prigozhin business empire among the MoD and GRU, the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), and the FSB.[57] Yet clearly defined control over paramilitary forces like the Africa Corps increases their reliance on and connection to the Russian government,

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[54] Helen Regan et al., "Wagner Head Says Group Standing Down," *CNN*, June 24, 2023, https://www.cnn.com/europe/live-news/russia-ukraine-war-news-06-24-23/index.html.

[55] Frank Gardner, Robert Greenall, and Jaroslav Lukiv, "Wagner Chief Yevgeny Prigozhin Presumed Dead after Russia Plane Crash," *BBC News*, August 23, 2023, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-66599733; Thomas Grove, Alan Cullison, and Bojan Pancevski, "How Putin's Right-Hand Man Took Out Prigozhin," *The Wall Street Journal*, December 22, 2023, sec. World, https://www.wsj.com/world/russia/putin-patrushev-plan-prigozhin-assassination-428d5ed8.

[56] Filip Bryjka and Jędrzej Czerep, "Africa Corps - A New Iteration of Russia's Old Military Presence in Africa" (Warsaw: The Polish Institute of International Affairs, May 2024), 7–8, https://pism.pl/webroot/upload/files/Raport/PISM%20Report%20Africa%20Corps_end.pdf.

[57] Ibid.

thus reducing their practicality: The GRU began using the Wagner Group for its operations abroad because of its murky legal status and independent financing, and a more tightly controlled Africa Corps lacks the same benefit.[58] The group holds its position in several African countries anyway; under GRU General Andrei Averyanov's command, the Africa Corps has maintained a strong presence in Burkina Faso, CAR, Libya, Mali, and Niger.[59]

It is also important to note that the Africa Corps and its predecessors in the Wagner Group are not the only paramilitary forces operating on the MoD and GRU's behalf abroad. Other PMSCs like Redut, originally formed in 2008 to protect to protect Stroytransgaz facilities in Syria and now closely affiliated with the GRU; Convoy, a group started by Wagner operative Konstantin Pikalov in 2009; and Patriot, another MoD-linked company with experience in CAR and Sudan, have also contributed to Russia's expanding footprint abroad.[60] Energy giant Gazprom has formed several of its own combat units called Potok, Fakel, and Plamya, though their involvement in Russian activity outside of the Ukraine invasion is unknown.[61] Finally, while *Rosgvardiya* (Russian National Guard) forces under the control of Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov,

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[58] Bryjka and Czerep, "Africa Corps," 7–8; German, "Evolution of Russia's Use of Private Military Companies," 37–39.

[59] Bryjka and Czerep, "Africa Corps," 6; German, "Evolution of Russia's Use of Private Military Companies," 37.

[60] German, "Evolution of Russia's Use of Private Military Companies," 24–27; Kimberly Marten, "Russian Foreign Paramilitary Outfits beyond Wagner," *Russian Analytical Digest* 303 (October 18, 2023): 12–14, https://doi.org/10.3929/ETHZ-B-000636561.

[61] German, "Evolution of Russia's Use of Private Military Companies," 27–28.

colloquially known as *Kadyrovtsy,* have not been deployed to Africa or the Middle East, their participation in the invasion of Ukraine nonetheless demonstrates the Russian government's willingness to employ paramilitary forces in place of traditional military units.[62]

[62] German, "Evolution of Russia's Use of Private Military Companies," 30–31.

Chapter 2: Afghanistan and Syria

2.1: Introduction

The first two case studies in Russia's history of foreign military interventions worth comparing are the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Russian intervention in Syria. Though these campaigns took place in separate countries, under different regimes, and decades apart from one another, they are, in fact, remarkably similar: In both cases, the Russian government provided military support to autocratic regimes in the Middle East in order to maintain its own foothold in the region, and spent years combating insurgencies with support from the West. Moreover, both campaigns resulted in a strategic failure for Russia, with the Republic of Afghanistan falling to Taliban rule just three years after the Soviet Union's withdrawal and the al-Assad regime collapsing in December 2024.

Despite their numerous similarities, the Russian military operations in Afghanistan and Syria followed different paths. In Afghanistan, the Soviet Union began its invasion with a raid on the Tajbeg Palace, killing President Hafizullah Amin, and deployed over 100,000 troops at the height of the war.[63] The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan would ultimately involve upward of 600,000 soldiers before its conclusion in 1989.[64] When intervening in the Syrian Civil War, by contrast, the Russian Ministry of

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[63] Robert Fisk, *The Great War for Civilisation: The Conquest of the Middle East* (London: Fourth Estate, 2005), 40–41.

[64] G. F. Krivosheev, ed., *Soviet Casualties and Combat Losses in the Twentieth Century*, trans. Christine Barnard (Greenhill Books, 1997), 365.

Defense sought to maintain a smaller footprint, first utilizing airstrikes and sea-launched cruise missiles before turning to small deployments of special forces units and private military contractors.[65] Estimates of the total number of Russian personnel involved in the Syrian intervention between 2015 and 2024 range from approximately 5,000 to upward of 20,000, but this figure is still a mere fraction of the Afghan invasion force, and it is important to take this differential into account when comparing the two campaigns.[66]

Comparison between the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan and the Russian Federation's intervention in Syria is valuable for several reasons. First, parallels between the locations, circumstances, and results of each campaign expose how certain aspects of both the Soviet and Russian governments' strategies have remained unchanged. In this case, the differences between these two engagements—namely, the size differential between the Soviet and Russian forces and the tactics they employed—reveal a paradigm shift in Russian military strategy. The decision to rely primarily on airstrikes and semi-state paramilitaries like the Wagner Group represents a significant departure from the full-scale nature of the Afghan invasion. Taken together, a comparison of the Soviet and Russian militaries' operations in Afghanistan and Syria demonstrates not only

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[65] Seth G. Jones, "Soleimani, Gerasimov, and Strategies of Irregular Warfare," in *The New Makers of Modern Strategy*, ed. Hal Brands (Princeton University Press, 2023), 1015, https://press.princeton.edu/books/hardcover/9780691204383/the-new-makers-of-modern-strategy.

[66] Nikita Smagin, "Moscow's Original 'Special Operation': Why Russia Is Staying in Syria," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 7, 2023, https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2023/01/moscows-original-special-operation-why-russia-is-staying-in-syria?lang=en; "Wagner Groups in Syria from Their Formation to Expulsion from Mercy," *Syrian Observatory for Human Rights* (blog), June 29, 2023, https://www.syriahr.com/%d9%85%d8%ac%d9%85%d9%88%d8%b9%d8%a7%d8%aa-%d9%81%d8%a7%d8%ba%d9%86%d8%b1-%d9%81%d9%8a-%d8%b3%d9%88%d8%b1%d9%8a%d8%a7-%d9%85%d9%86%d8%b0-%d8%aa%d9%83%d9%88%d9%8a%d9%86%d9%87%d8%a7-%d9%88%d8%ad%d8%aa/614878/.

continuity between the two regimes' national security decision-making processes, but a critical degree of evolution as well.

2.2: The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan

Despite its massive scale, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan did not materialize out of thin air. In the years before the Soviet invasion in December 1979, the KGB played a vital role in shaping Mohammad Daoud Khan's authoritarian regime following the 1973 coup d'état.[67] After the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) deposed Khan in the 1978 Saur Revolution, the KGB began fortifying its presence in the country in preparation for drastic political change.[68] After Hafizullah Amin seized power in September, however, Soviet leadership became convinced that he was planning on "doing a Sadat" and expelling all Soviet forces in the country.[69] Anticipating that Amin would turn against the Soviet Union in favor of the West, the Soviet Armed Forces—along with the KGB—began planning a full-scale invasion that would forcibly remove the Afghan president from power and establish a friendlier, more malleable regime in October 1979.[70] Just two months later on December 27, 1979, *spetsnaz* units from the KGB's Alpha

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[67] Vasiliy Mitrokhin, "The KGB in Afghanistan," Cold War International History Project (Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, July 2002), 2–3, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/WP40-english.pdf.

[68] Andrew and Mitrokhin, *The Mitrokhin Archive II,* 396–397; Bruce D. Porter, *The USSR in Third World Conflicts: Soviet Arms and Diplomacy in Local Wars, 1945-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 33–34.

[69] Odd Arne Westad, "Concerning the Situation in 'A': New Russian Evidence on the Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan," ed. James G. Hershberg, *The Cold War in the Third World and the Collapse of Detente in the 1970s*, Cold War International History Project, 8/9 (Winter 1996): 130.

[70] Andrew and Mitrokhin, *The Mitrokhin Archive II*, 397–398.

Group and the GRU's 154th separate special forces detachment stormed Tajbeg Palace, killing Amin and 179 others.[71] *Spetsnaz* units from the KGB and GRU would later play a vital role in the occupation of Afghanistan by collaborating with informants from the *Mujahideen* insurgency, targeting rebel leaders, and collecting strategic intelligence for the Soviet military command.[72]

During the initial phases of the invasion, the Soviet offensive in Afghanistan closely resembled most other contemporary military operations: Airstrikes from helicopters, fixed-wing aircraft, and artillery preceded advances by armored columns, which would then clear the way for dismounted infantry.[73] As the war progressed and Afghan resistance mounted, the Soviet military was forced to adapt its strategy, focus on maintaining control of crucial urban areas through conventional forces, and deny the *Mujahideen* significant territorial gains, rather than completely eliminating resistance through paramilitary forces and direct action.[74] By focusing its efforts on population centers like Kabul, the Soviet military sought to avoid drastically increasing the number of personnel and equipment it had already deployed to Afghanistan. This strategy resulted in a clear divide between Soviet and *Mujahideen*-controlled territory during the

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[71] Jonathan Haslam, *Near and Distant Neighbors: A New History of Soviet Intelligence* (Macmillan, 2015), 249–250; Mitrokhin, "The KGB in Afghanistan," 13.

[72] Mitrokhin, "The KGB in Afghanistan," 115–116.

[73] Lester W. Grau and Mohammad Yahya Nawroz, "The Soviet War in Afghanistan: History and Harbinger of Future War?" (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: Foreign Military Studies Office, June 1996), https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/cbr/cbr00/video/cbr_ctd/cbr_ctd_52.html.

[74] Alexander Alexiev, *Inside the Soviet Army in Afghanistan*, R-3627-A (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1988), https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA213733.pdf.

occupation, and a considerably more limited campaign than the American war in Vietnam just years prior.[75] However, it did not produce the intended result, and Soviet forces never seized or maintained control over rural areas in the country because of their urban focus.

The Soviets were forced to adapt their approach in Afghanistan for several reasons. First, the indigenous Afghan forces' low effectiveness in battle necessitated increased participation in combat among Soviet forces, something the Kremlin had not prepared for. The early contingent of Soviet troops was deployed in December 1979 to secure Afghan military bases, cities, and critical infrastructure and in turn enable the Afghan Armed Forces' offensive against the *Mujahideen*, but widespread ineffectiveness and low morale among Afghan troops forced the Soviets to increase their presence after a matter of weeks.[76] The *Mujahideen* insurgency further compelled the Soviets to commit more troops than they had planned for, as the ineffectual Afghan forces and the limited contingent of Soviet soldiers—by the end of December 1979, only 80,000 were in the country—could not realistically keep them at bay.[77] By comparison, the United States deployed roughly half a million troops at its peak involvement in Vietnam, a country one-fifth the size of Afghanistan.[78] The CIA's introduction of FIM-92 Stinger

[75] Grau and Nawroz, "The Soviet War in Afghanistan: History and Harbinger of Future War?"

[76] David C. Gompert, Hans Binnendijk, and Bonny Lin, "The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan, 1979," in *Blinders, Blunders, and Wars*, What America and China Can Learn (RAND Corporation, 2014), 133, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/j.ctt1287m9t.18.

[77] Fisk, *The Great War for Civilisation*, 40–41; В. С. Христофоров et al., "Военная стратегия Советского Союза в Афганистане: просчеты планирования и общественное неприятие," *Quaestio Rossica. 2020. T. 8. № 2* 8, no. 2 (2020): 392, https://doi.org/10.15826/qr.2020.2.469.

[78] "Vietnam War Statistics," Vietnam Veterans of America, accessed February 24, 2025, https://www.vva310.org/vietnam-war-statistics.

man-portable air defense systems (MANPADS) to the conflict further complicated the Soviets' IW (irregular warfare) strategy, as it made close air support (CAS) far more risky for helicopter and ground-attack fighter pilots.[79] Simply put, the Afghan Armed Forces' poor performance, the limited number of Soviet troops, and new weapons technology from the United States resulted in a far more challenging and involving IW campaign than the Kremlin had planned for.

In another way, though, the Soviets' experience in Afghanistan did closely resemble that of their American counterparts in Vietnam, as Soviet forces had to adapt their strategies of combating the *Mujahideen*, just like the Americans did when fighting the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army (NVA). Ambitions for total control over Afghanistan were later discarded in favor of a more realistic strategy focused on urban areas, but the Soviet strategy remained largely conventional in its reliance on mechanized infantry, tanks, and artillery.[80] In the decades of bipolar competition before the invasion of Afghanistan, the Soviet military prepared for all-out war with the United States and NATO, assuming all future wars would be a decisive clash between capitalist and socialist superpowers, not a counterinsurgency (COIN) campaign against a comparatively unsophisticated enemy.[81] Consequently, the invasion began in typical Soviet fashion, with

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[79] Walter Kunkle, "The Cobra and the Mongoose: The Legacy Of The Mi-24 and the Stinger Missile in The Soviet-Afghan War," Small Wars Journal, November 25, 2023, https://smallwarsjournal.com/2023/11/25/cobra-and-mongoose-legacy-mi-24-and-stinger-missile-soviet-afghan-war/.

[80] Grau and Nawroz, "The Soviet War in Afghanistan: History and Harbinger of Future War?"

[81] Jose L Rodriguez, "The Soviet - Afghan War, 1979-1989: Failures in Irregular Warfare" (Quantico, VA: United States Marine Corps Command and Staff College, Marine Corps University, April 30, 2008), 5–6, https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA491229.pdf.

airborne and ground units capturing key military installations before other forces arrived in the country.[82] As the occupation wore on, it became increasingly clear that the Soviet command and control structure—one that had proven itself highly capable during the invasions of Hungary and Czechoslovakia in 1956 and 1968—was better suited to replacing foreign governments than inheriting a COIN campaign.[83] Therefore, while it succeeded in ousting the Amin regime, the Soviet military failed to account for the COIN mission it would take on in the invasion's aftermath, and entered Afghanistan unprepared for combat against the *Mujahideen.*

Given their success in executing Operation Storm-333, the KGB and GRU *spetsnaz* units appeared a natural tool for combating the insurgency in Afghanistan. However, while successful in combating the *Mujahideen* behind enemy lines, the KGB and GRU *spetsnaz* units' IW operations more closely resembled a successful insurgency campaign than a COIN one: Rather than trying to restore peace and security in rural areas of Afghanistan through psychological operations, indigenous security cooperation, and other conventional COIN tactics, the *spetsnaz* were tasked with conducting their own ambushes and assassinations.[84] Moreover, KGB and GRU *spetsnaz* formed a small fraction of the overall Soviet presence in Afghanistan, and, when compared to airstrikes and artillery, were sparingly used against the *Mujahideen*.[85] As a result, the Soviet

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[82] Rodriguez, "The Soviet - Afghan War, 1979-1989," 6–7.

[83] Ibid, 7–8.

[84] Alexiev, *Inside the Soviet Army in Afghanistan*, 32–33.

[85] Rodriguez, "The Soviet - Afghan War, 1979-1989," 8.

military—a military that spent the previous three decades preparing for a near-peer conflict with the United States and its allies in Western Europe—failed to adapt a successful COIN strategy that took full advantage of its irregular forces, which were ineffective when combating the *Mujahideen* as a result.

In conclusion, the Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan, while successful at first, failed to adapt to the requirements of a COIN campaign against the *Mujahideen* for several reasons. First, the Soviet military began its invasion with highly conservative expectations for the number of troops and equipment the Afghan campaign would require: By placing their faith in the already-weakened Afghan Armed Forces, the Soviets assumed they could establish control over the country with an unrealistically small force. Second, the Soviet strategy failed to place enough attention on more rural parts of the country, instead focusing its efforts on military bases and population centers consistent with its preparations for total war with the United States and NATO. Third and finally, while the Soviet military did possess a strong IW capability in the form of its *spetsnaz* units, they were used ineffectively, spending undue time on sabotage and ambush missions rather than meaningful COIN operations.

2.3: The Russian Intervention in Syria

The Russian Armed Forces began the Syrian intervention with a limited strategy in mind. Rather than launching into a full-scale invasion with a large and ambitious occupation force, the Kremlin began its intervention with indirect support of al-Assad.

Russian forces first conducted airstrikes in support of Syrian troop movements in September and October of 2015 with tactical bombers and ground attack aircraft, but soon after began launching air-launched cruise missiles (ALCMs) with long-range strategic bombers at ISIS targets throughout the country.[86] At the same time, Russia began quietly deploying soldiers from a variety of private military and security companies (PMSCs), semi-state paramilitary groups, and special forces units.[87]

Chief among the Russian irregular forces deployed to Syria was the Wagner Group, which, by 2018, had deployed between 2,000 and 2,500 fighters in Syria. These soldiers not only helped al-Assad forces recapture the city of Palmyra from ISIS in March 2016, but did so at roughly half the annual cost of conventional Russian soldiers, and provided combat expertise at a similar level to special forces units while limiting the number of official casualties.[88] Though Wagner did not always operate in Syria on behalf of the Russian state, its members' direct participation in combat—a departure from traditional PMSC operations—turned the intervention into "a key testing ground for the Russian use of PMSCs…[allowing] the state to avoid official military casualties and subsequent public concerns."[89] The official number of Russian soldiers on the ground in

[86] Genevieve Casagrande, "Russian Strikes in Syria: November 7 - November 17, 2015," Institute for the Study of War, November 18, 2015, http://dev-isw.bivings.com/.

[87] Thomas Grove, "Up to Nine Russian Contractors Die in Syria, Experts Say," *Wall Street Journal*, December 18, 2015, sec. World, http://www.wsj.com/articles/up-to-nine-russian-contractors-die-in-syria-experts-say-1450467757; Brian Katz et al., "Moscow's Mercenary Wars: The Expansion of Russian Private Military Companies" (Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 2020), 12, https://russianpmcs.csis.org/.

[88] Marten, "Russia's Use of Semi-State Security Forces," 193.

[89] Tracey German, "The Evolution of Russia's Use of Private Military Companies as Instruments of State Power" (Stuttgart, Germany: Russia Strategic Initiative, U.S. European Command, n.d.)., 19.

Syria only ever reached roughly 4,000, but by supplementing traditional GRU and Special Operations Forces (SSO) *spetsnaz* units with paramilitary forces from Wagner and other organizations, the Russian military command was able to effectively support the al-Assad regime's offensive against ISIS while maintaining a comparatively small footprint.[90]

The Kremlin's use of PMSCs and paramilitary organizations in Syria afforded its IW campaign several advantages. First, by delegating responsibility for coordinating paramilitary action to its intelligence agencies (primarily the GRU), the Kremlin relieved its military command structures of the administrative burden of hiring fighters from Wagner, RSB Group, and other similar organizations.[91] At the same time, many of these same organizations were closely intertwined with Russian-owned oil and natural gas companies, and while the GRU and its sister agencies bore the brunt of coordinating PMSCs in Syria, the dual responsibilities of supporting the military intervention and protecting private drill sites nonetheless complicated their mission.[92]

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[90] Brian Katz et al., "Moscow's Mercenary Wars: The Expansion of Russian Private Military Companies" (Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 2020), https://russianpmcs.csis.org/, 33; Roger McDermott, "Russia's Special Operations Forces Command and the Strategy of Limited Actions," Jamestown Foundation, May 21, 2019, https://jamestown.org/program/russias-special-operations-forces-command-and-the-strategy-of-limited-actions/.

[91] Tracey German, "The Evolution of Russia's Use of Private Military Companies as Instruments of State Power" (Stuttgart, Germany: Russia Strategic Initiative, U.S. European Command, n.d.), 17, 27–28; Kimberly Marten, "Why the Wagner Group Cannot Be Easily Absorbed by the Russian Military—and What That Means for the West," Russia Matters, September 1, 2023, https://www.russiamatters.org/analysis/why-wagner-group-cannot-be-easily-absorbed-russian-military-and-what-means-west.

[92] Andrew E. Kramer, "Russia Deploys a Potent Weapon in Syria: The Profit Motive," *The New York Times*, July 5, 2017, sec. World, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/05/world/middleeast/russia-syria-oil-isis.html.

Operational contradictions aside, the Russian PMSCs' administrative structure in Syria enabled better coordination between paramilitary and military units, and ensured that important paramilitary assets were used effectively, unlike in Afghanistan. Russian paramilitary forces in Syria also worked very closely with the Syrian Armed Forces (SAF), rather than focusing on completing their invasion before handing off the ensuing COIN mission to the Syrians per the Soviet model in Afghanistan.[93] The Syrian Armed Forces were not left to combat ISIS and the Syrian Democratic Forces as their Afghan counterparts were by the Soviet military, as both Russian *spetsnaz* units and paramilitary forces were closely integrated within the Syrian military, and even helped to stand up new units like the Tiger Forces and the 5th Assault Corps.[94] Moreover, the Russian military's decisions to use intelligence organizations like the GRU to coordinate its paramilitary forces and closely integrate them with the Syrian Armed Forces resulted in a more effective IW campaign.

Though the Kremlin first deployed the Wagner Group and other paramilitary forces in Syria to complement its *spetsnaz* units in training, advising, and assisting indigenous Syrian forces, their mission ultimately changed from one of support into one of direct action. During the first Palmyra offensive in March 2016, Wagner forces

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[93] German, "Evolution of Russia's Use of Private Military Companies," 19–20.

[94] "Moscow's War in Syria," CSIS Transnational Threats Project (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2020), https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/Jones_MoscowsWarinSyria_WEB_update.pdf, 33–34, 37.

coordinated troop movements, directed airstrikes, and performed other advisory duties as "elite infantry."[95] Over the following months, their involvement in training efforts waned, and Wagner was redeployed to Syria in early 2017 for the second Palmyra offensive, though a shortage of modern equipment and skilled fighters resulted in heavy casualties.[96] In September 2017, Wagner forces helped to repel a rebel offensive north of Hama, and participated in the battle of Deir ez-Zor the following month.[97]

The Kremlin's relationship with paramilitary and PMSC forces in Syria, while productive, was not without friction. Yevgeny Prigozhin, leader of the Wagner Group, had on numerous occasions clashed with senior military officials like Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov over Wagner's independence from the Ministry of Defense (MOD) when conducting operations

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[95] Aleksandr Gostev and Robert Coalson, "Russia's Paramilitary Mercenaries Emerge From The Shadows," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 19:58:00Z, sec. Russia, https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-paramilitary-mercenaries-emerge-from-the-shadows-syria-ukraine/28180321.html.

[96] Samer al-Ahmed and Mohammed Hassan, "Syria Is Where the Conflict between Wagner and the Russian Government Began" (Middle East Institute, June 14, 2023), https://mei.edu/publications/syria-where-conflict-between-wagner-and-russian-government-began; Owen Matthews, "Putin's Secret Armies Waged War in Syria—Where Will They Fight Next?," *Newsweek*, January 17, 2018, sec. World, https://www.newsweek.com/2018/01/26/putin-secret-army-waged-war-syria-782762.html.

[97] Denis Strelkov, "Former Russian Mercenary Lifts Lid on Secretive Wagner Group," *RFI*, May 21, 2022, sec. international, https://www.rfi.fr/en/international/20220521-former-russian-mercenary-gabidullin-lifts-lid-on-secretive-wagner-group; "В Боях в Сирии Погиб Уроженец Оренбурга Сергей Карпунин," Гео Политика, May 11, 2017, https://web.archive.org/web/20200919030637/http://geo-politica.info/v-boyakh-v-sirii-pogib-urozhenets-orenburga-sergey-karpunin.html.

abroad.[98] During the Syrian intervention, debate among Russian politicians and pro-Kremlin journalists known as "milbloggers" about the legalization of PMSCs became increasingly mainstream, and the potential for Wagner and other organizations like it to gain a new protected legal status may have raised alarm among defense officials. The Wagner Group's operations in Syria came to a head in February 2018 after crossing a deconfliction zone border with Syria's 4th Armored Division and subsequently attacking a Kurdish-controlled Conoco gas plant protected by U.S. special forces.[99] Until this point, the Wagner Group's activities in Syria appeared closely coordinated with the Russian armed forces and the Kremlin itself, but the Russian government's reluctance to account for the Wagner Group's presence despite numerous attempts from the Pentagon suggests the relationship had seriously frayed by this time.[100] In this case, the Kremlin seems to have abandoned Wagner, leaving the American special forces operators, fighter jets, and attack helicopters to eliminate the paramilitary in a devastating firefight known as the Battle of Khasam.[101] It is also possible that senior Russian military officials encouraged Wagner to engage the American forces, hoping to use the ensuing carnage as payback for

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[98] Pavel K. Baev, Mark Galeotti, and Graeme P. Herd, "Russia's End State: Assessing Prigozhin's Legacy," Strategic Competition Seminar Series FY25 (Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany: George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, 2024), https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/clock-tower-series/strategic-competition-seminar-series-fy25/russias-end-state-assessing-prigozhins-legacy.

[99] Marten, "Russia's Use of Semi-State Security Forces," 194.

[100] Mike Eckel, "Pentagon Says U.S. Was Told No Russians Involved In Syria Attack," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, February 23, 2018, sec. Russia, https://www.rferl.org/a/syria-deir-zor-attack-pentagon-russians-involved/29058555.html.

[101] Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "How a 4-Hour Battle Between Russian Mercenaries and U.S. Commandos Unfolded in Syria," *The New York Times*, May 24, 2018, sec. World, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/24/world/middleeast/american-commandos-russian-mercenaries-syria.html.

unfulfilled contracts from the years and months leading up to it.[102] While the real reason for the Kremlin's indifference to the Wagner fighters' fates remains unknown, it is difficult to view it as anything other than a calculated move to punish—or eliminate—the paramilitary.

In the battle's aftermath, the Wagner Group's combat operations in Syria continued, but their operations were periodically interrupted as the Russian government found itself increasingly involved in the conflict in Libya, and began using members of Wagner to recruit Syrians in support of Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA).[103] The Syrian government nonetheless continued awarding contracts to operate oil and gas fields to Wagner-affiliated shell companies as late as 2021, and the group maintained a presence in the country until the withdrawal of all Russian forces in late 2024.[104] According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, Wagner forces participated in a large-scale military operation against ISIS in December 2021, targeting ISIS cells in the

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[102] Marten, "Russia's Use of Semi-State Security Forces," 196.

[103] Anchal Vohra, "It's Syrian vs. Syrian in Libya," *Foreign Policy*, February 27, 2025, https://foreignpolicy-com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/2020/05/05/libya-civil-conflict-syrian-mercenaries-turkey-russia-gna-haftar/; Eric Schmitt, "Russian Attack Jets Back Mercenaries Fighting in Libya," *The New York Times*, September 11, 2020, sec. U.S., https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/11/us/politics/russian-jets-mercenaries-libya.html.

[104] Avery Schmitz and Natasha Bertrand, "Russian Military Has Begun Large-Scale Withdrawal from Syria, US and Western Officials Say," *CNN*, December 16, 2024, https://www.cnn.com/2024/12/16/politics/russia-military-syria-withdrawal/index.html; Olivia Allison et al., "Wagner's Business Model in Syria and Africa: Profit and Patronage," Occasional Paper (London, UK: The Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, 2025), 12, https://static.rusi.org/wagners-business-model-in-syria-and-africa_0.pdf.

Syrian desert northeast of al-Raqqa.[105] The Wagner Group also continued to protect oil and gas facilities operated by Evro Polis LLC, a private company tied to Yevgeny Prigozhin, as well as Stroytransgaz, a Russian oil engineering company owned by Putin associate and former KGB officer Gennady Timchenko.[106] It is no coincidence, then, that Timchenko soon after began building up his own paramilitary organization known as "Redut," which protected Stroytransgaz sites in Syria and assisted Russian military units during the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.[107] By the time the al-Assad regime collapsed in December 2024, however, Russian paramilitary forces' presence in Syria had decreased considerably, and a large number of fighters from Wagner and other organizations had been redeployed to Ukraine, Libya, and other areas of Russian interest.

2.4: Conclusion

Comparison of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Russian intervention in Syria reveals several vital changes in the Russian approach to IW in the Middle East. First, the contemporary Russian government avoided mounting a full-scale invasion in support of the al-Assad regime as its Soviet forebears did in Afghanistan: The Russian Armed Forces kept their official numbers in the country to a minimum, instead deploying

[105] "Supported by Regime Forces | Wagner and Fatemiyoun Launch Military Campaign against ISIS in Syrian Desert," The Syrian Observatory For Human Rights, December 22, 2021, https://www.syriahr.com/en/231799/.

[106] Marten, "Why the Wagner Group Cannot Be Easily Absorbed by the Russian Military—and What That Means for the West"; "EVRO POLIS LLC – The Wagner Project," The Wagner Project, accessed February 25, 2025, https://wagnerproject.org/the-players/sanctioned-entities/evro-polis-llc/; Mohammad Bassiki et al., "A 'Bloody' Trade: Inside the Murky Supply Chain Bringing Syrian Phosphates Into Europe," Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, June 30, 2022, https://www.occrp.org/en/investigation/a-bloody-trade-inside-the-murky-supply-chain-bringing-syrian-phosphates-into-europe.

[107] Kimberly Marten, "Russian Foreign Paramilitary Outfits beyond Wagner," 12–13.

paramilitary forces from the Wagner Group and other paramilitaries to augment indigenous Syrian units.

Paramilitaries like the Wagner Group provided a cost-effective solution during the Syrian intervention, allowing the Russian government to successfully combat IS-backed militias without enduring the costs—both political and financial—of an invasion like that in Afghanistan. The Russian Federation, in other words, was able to conduct a COIN campaign in Syria comparable in size and duration to the Soviet Union's in Afghanistan without mobilizing its economy or suffering significant casualties. This in turn represents a broader shift toward decreased costs and greater flexibility throughout Russia's military operations in the Global South.

Despite its massive nuclear arsenal and sustained monopoly over the liquefied natural gas market, the Russian Federation of today cannot come close to replicating the superpower status of the Soviet Union at its peak. Russia simply lacks the funds to deploy an invasion force to Syria comparable to that of the Soviet military in Afghanistan. Its use of the Wagner Group resulted in an equally effective military campaign at a fraction of the cost, ultimately allowing the Russian Federation to maintain its foothold in Middle Eastern geopolitics and remain strategically competitive when it otherwise could not afford to do so.

Chapter 3: Angola and Libya

3.1: Introduction

Two more case studies that merit comparative analysis are the Soviet military's participation in the Angolan Civil War and the Wagner Group's deployment to Libya. In both cases, the Kremlin deployed a mix of military advisors, special forces, and equipment in support of nascent military regimes: in Angola, the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), and in Libya, the Libyan National Army (LNA). Soviet and Russian forces also began operations in these countries during periods of great political turmoil. By the time the Soviet Union began deploying its forces in support of the MPLA in 1975, the Angolan War of Independence had already raged for fourteen years, and Libya's second civil war had just passed its fifth anniversary when the Wagner Group first arrived in April 2019.[108] Warring factions and foreign actors like the National Front for the Liberation of Angola (FNLA), Cuba, and East Germany in Angola and the Libyan Ground Forces (LGF), ISIS, and Turkey in Libya further complicated the Kremlin's strategic objectives.

It is essential to draw a comparison between the Soviet and Russian IW campaigns in Angola and Libya, as their similarities can provide insight into the evolution of the Kremlin's IW strategy abroad and better inform contemporary policy. At the same time, it is important to remain cognizant of several key differences between the

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[108] "Soviet Military Support to Angola: Intentions and Prospects," Special National Intelligence Estimate (Langley, VA: Directorate of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, November 1985), 7, https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP87T00573R000801010002-2.pdf; David D. Kirkpatrick, "Russian Snipers, Missiles and Warplanes Try to Tilt Libyan War," *The New York Times*, November 5, 2019, sec. World, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/05/world/middleeast/russia-libya-mercenaries.html.

two locations. While Angola and Libya may resemble each other in many ways—both are former European colonies with comparably low gross domestic products (GDPs) and economies completely dependent on crude oil—their cultural, geographical, and demographic differences should not be discounted.[109] Angola is home to four main ethnic groups and almost entirely Catholic, whereas Libya's population is predominantly Arab and Sunni Muslim. Though they are not directly tied to the Soviet and Russian interventions, the anthropological characteristics unique to each country should be kept in mind when comparing their military histories.

The Soviet Union's participation in the Angolan Civil War represents an early prototype of the proxy force-dependent strategy that the Russian Federation would later make extensive use of in Syria, Ukraine, and elsewhere. In this case, instead of relying on private military and security companies (PMSCs) and paramilitary forces like the Wagner Group, the Kremlin used Cuban, East German, North Vietnamese, and North Korean forces under Soviet military advisors' leadership to execute its military strategy and ultimately achieve a political victory. The intervention in Angola proved to the Kremlin that it could conduct effective military campaigns abroad with foreign proxies and a minimal number of its own troops, thus setting a vital precedent for future Russian foreign policy efforts.

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[109] "Report for Selected Countries and Subjects," IMF, October 2023, https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/weo-database/2023/October/weo-report; "IMF DataMapper: Libya," October 2024, https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/profile.

3.2: The Soviet Campaign in Angola

Angola represents one of the Soviet Union's most consequential foreign interventions during the second half of the Cold War. The Kremlin watched the anti-Portuguese insurgency in Angola with relative impassivity for over a decade, and chose not to fully commit its support to a single resistance movement during the Angolan War for Independence. Soviet support to the MPLA finally began in the final quarter of 1974 after the outbreak of the Angolan Civil War, and ultimately involved more than one thousand military advisors and roughly $4 billion in military aid.[110] It is important to note that before the Angolan Civil War broke out, the Soviet Union did not differentiate between the major political movements in Angola, and instead viewed the MPLA's rivals, the FNLA and the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) as the only factions of significance, and virtually equal at that.[111] These factions remained united during the 1961–1975 Angolan War of Independence, but nine months after the signing of the Alvor Accords on January 15, 1975, all three declared independence from one another and established their own capitals in Luanda, Huambo, and Ambriz along ethnic and ideological lines.[112] The FNLA and UNITA soon thereafter formed an alliance

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[110] "Soviet Military Support to Angola: Intentions and Prospects," Special National Intelligence Estimate (Langley, VA: Directorate of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, November 1985), 7, https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP87T00573R000801010002-2.pdf.https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000518406.pdf, iii.

[111] Daniel S. Papp, "Angola, National Liberation, and the Soviet Union," *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 8, no. 1 (July 4, 1978): 28, https://doi.org/10.55540/0031-1723.1151.https://doi.org/10.55540/0031-1723.1151.

[112] Donald Rothchild, *Managing Ethnic Conflict in Africa: Pressures and Incentives for Cooperation* (Brookings Institution Press, 1997), 115–116, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7864/jj.17497105.https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7864/jj.17497105.

against the MPLA, uniting the Bakongo and Ovimbundu peoples under a common anti-communist movement.[113]

Once the Angolan War of Independence ended and the Angolan Civil War began in November 1975, the Soviet Union significantly increased its military and economic support for the MPLA. In fact, the Kremlin had begun planning its intervention in March 1975, and its first shipments of tanks and mortars arrived before fighting between rival Angolan factions broke out on March 23, 1975.[114] The Soviet decision to become involved in Angola military resulted from a decade of tentative political support, as was the case during the invasion of Afghanistan that would come four years later, but the Soviets sought to help one political faction in Angola establish military dominance rather than oust the sitting regime. This resulted in a more complex conflict for the Soviet forces, as they were forced to balance offensives against UNITA, the FNLA, and the Front for the Liberation of the Enclave of Cabinda (FLEC) as well as irregular forces from South Africa and Zaire.[115] By comparison, Soviet forces in Afghanistan were able to focus their efforts on combating the *Mujahideen* insurgency, which, despite having received FIM-92 Stinger missiles from the CIA, was not nearly as technically comparable

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[113] "The Angolan Civil War (1975-2002): A Brief History," South African History Online, February 5, 2023, https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/angolan-civil-war-1975-2002-brief-history.

[114] "Soviet and Cuban Intervention in the Angolan Civil War," Intelligence Memorandum (Langley, VA: Directorate of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, March 1977), 10–12, https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000518406.pdf.

[115] W. Martin III James, *Historical Dictionary of Angola* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2004, 60); Geraint Hughes, *My Enemy's Enemy: Proxy Warfare in International Politics* (Liverpool University Press, 2014), 65–79, https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.4256610; W. Martin III James, ed., *A Political History of the Civil War in Angola, 1974-1990*, 1st edition (London: Routledge, 2011), 207–214.

to the Red Army as the MPLA, FNLA, and UNITA were to each other.[116] The Angolan Civil War, in other words, resulted in a convoluted political environment that was difficult for the Kremlin to gauge.

Four days after Angola achieved independence from Portugal on November 11, 1975, the Soviet Union rapidly expanded its military aid shipments to the MPLA: Over the course of eleven months, Soviet ships and Antonov An-22 heavy transport aircraft delivered small arms, T-34 and T-54 tanks, and artillery pieces worth upward of $300 million.[117] The Kremlin did not deploy combat troops or even military advisors to Angola at this time, hoping its weapons alone could help the MPLA achieve military victory. However, the MPLA's operations against the U.S.-backed FNLA lost their momentum soon thereafter, and it became clear that better-trained forces were necessary to reinvigorate the MPLA offensive.[118] While the Soviet leadership recognized the need for competent military advisors in Angola, they hesitated to send forces from the KGB, GRU, or conventional armed forces, fearing a Soviet deployment could trigger American involvement and escalate the war unfavorably. Instead, the Kremlin reached an agreement with Cuba to deploy its own troops, which, given their "third world" status, would be both more politically acceptable to African opinion and less likely to provoke

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[116] William Maley, *The Afghanistan Wars* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 80.

[117] Daniel S. Papp, "Angola, National Liberation, and the Soviet Union," *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 8, no. 1 (July 4, 1978): 33, https://doi.org/10.55540/0031-1723.1151; John A. Marcum, "Lessons of Angola," *Foreign Affairs* 54, no. 3 (1976): 417, https://doi.org/10.2307/20039585.https://doi.org/10.2307/20039585.

[118] "Soviet and Cuban Intervention in the Angolan Civil War," 16–17.

American or Chinese military action.[119] Over the next decade, 35,000 Cuban soldiers would participate on the MPLA's behalf, but Soviet military involvement in Angola did not stop there.[120]

In addition to the contingent of Cuban soldiers, the Kremlin ultimately deployed several thousand of its own troops throughout the course of the war.[121] Interestingly, the very first group of Soviet advisors to arrive in Angola were not members of the KGB or GRU's elite *spetsnaz* special forces teams: According to Vladimir Gennadyevich Shubin, former Secretary of the Soviet Afro-Asian Solidarity Committee, the first group of Soviet military instructors, which arrived in Luanda on November, 16, 1975, was specifically responsible for "[training] Angolans in the use of 'Strela' portable anti-aircraft missile launchers."[122] Estimates of the total number of Soviet troops involved in the Angolan Civil War vary wildly, with one declassified CIA estimate placing the total at 1,500 and the Moscow Institute of Military History claiming nearly 11,000.[123] In any case, the presence of Soviet forces in Angola has been repeatedly mythologized and hyperbolized,

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[119] "Soviet and Cuban Intervention in the Angolan Civil War," 16–17.

[120] "Soviet Military Support to Angola: Intentions and Prospects," Special National Intelligence Estimate (Langley, VA: Directorate of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, November 1985), 7, https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP87T00573R000801010002-2.

[121] Ibid.

[122] Vladimir Shubin and Andrei Tokarev, "War in Angola: A Soviet Dimension," *Review of African Political Economy* 28, no. 90 (2001): 613; В. А. Яременко, А. Н. Почтарев, and А. В. Усиков, *Россия (СССР) в Локальных Войнах и Вооруженных Конфликтах Второй Половины XX Века*, ed. В. А. Золотарева (Москва: Полиграфресурсы, 2000), 103, https://clio.columbia.edu/catalog/2629178.13.

[123] Shubin and Tokarev, "War in Angola," 614; "Soviet Military Support to Angola: Intentions and Prospects," 7.

with both English and Russian-language sources claiming the Soviets utilized all manners of special operations, chemical weapons, and more while supporting the MPLA.[124]

While the broader Soviet involvement in Angola was far less glamorous, Soviet advisors did participate in combat alongside MPLA forces at the battalion level.[125] During the first half of Mikhail Gorbachev's tenure as General Secretary, the Kremlin and its allies in East Germany, Cuba, China, and North Korea conducted four major offensives against the South African-backed UNITA.[126] In this case, it is important to understand that while Soviet military officers, technicians, and interpreters certainly participated in the Battle of Cuito Cuanavale, the Cuban "rapid deployment force" did the heavy lifting: Peter Vanneman, a former researcher at the Wilson Center, notes that "[relative] to their respective populations, the involvement of Cuba in Angola prior to 1988 was twice that of America in Vietnam."[127] The Kremlin was able to supplement the MPLA offensive with small, highly trained elements of its military and avoid direct American intervention by relying on a proxy force—in this case, the Cuban Army—that could form the bulk of the Eastern Bloc-aligned fighting force. While Cuba was certainly an adversary of the United States, it lacked the Soviet Union's superpower status, and its involvement in the

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[124] Shubin and Tokarev, 615.

[125] Owen Ellison Kahn, *Disengagement from Southwest Africa: The Prospects for Peace in Angola and Namibia* (Transaction Publishers, 1991), 70.

[126] Peter Vanneman, "Soviet Foreign Policy for Angola/Namibia in the 1980s: A Strategy of Coercive Diplomacy," in *Disengagement from Southwest Africa: Prospects for Peace in Angola and Namibia*, ed. Sander L. Gilman and Owen Kahn, 1st ed., 1991, 70.

[127] Ibid, 71.

Angolan Civil War was less likely to trigger direct military action from the United States, thus rendering it a safer option for the Kremlin.

Soviet involvement in Angola reached a breaking point during the Battle of Cuito Cuanavale. In what was the largest land battle in twentieth-century Africa, Soviet advisors and a mix of Cuban and North Vietnamese troops successfully defended the southeastern town of Cuito Cuanavale, an MPLA stronghold, as advancing UNITA infantry and South African special forces units converged nearby and attacked using long-range artillery and approximately 3,000 air sorties.[128] In November 1987, the Angolan, Cuban, and Soviet governments reached an agreement to increase the Eastern Bloc's military presence in the country, and Fidel Castro agreed to provide elite troops in case of a confrontation with South African forces along the Namibian border. Around the same time, North Vietnamese military advisors began arriving in Angola to support the coalition. On January 13, 1988, UNITA and South African troops attacked an air base in Cuito that was home to a Soviet air defense system; however, recent increases in the number of Cuban troops and the Vietnamese advisors' expertise in countering siege tactics caused high casualties among the attacking forces.[129] The Soviet-led defense at Cuito Cuanavale—along with further increases in the Cuban force presence and new

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[128] G. Shubin et al., eds., *Cuito Cuanavale: Frontline Accounts by Soviet Soldiers*, Illustrated edition (Jacana Media, 2015), 8–10; Vanneman, "Soviet Foreign Policy for Angola/Namibia," 77–79.

[129] G. Shubin et al., eds., *Cuito Cuanavale,* 8–10; Vanneman, "Soviet Foreign Policy for Angola/Namibia," 77–78; Horace Campbell, "The Siege of Cuito Cuanavale," Current African Issues (Uppsala, Sweden: The Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, October 1990), https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1x795h8YZGm0EAq0EKWJhhi2o0X2kPoZ0.

Soviet air defense systems—helped set the stage for a peace agreement favorable to the Kremlin in December 1988.[130]

3.3: Russian Irregular Warfare in Libya

Russia's presence in Libya long predates the Wagner Group. Following the overthrow of King Idris and Muammar Gaddafi's rise to power in 1969, the Libyan Arab Republic and the Soviet Union enjoyed a close and fruitful relationship: In 1975, the two nations reached an arms deal worth $800 million, and roughly 11,000 Soviet troops served as military advisors, instructors, and technicians in Libya between 1973 and 1991.[131] Despite the Soviet Union's dissolution in 1991, Russia and Libya maintained close military relations for another twenty years until Gaddafi's overthrow and execution during the First Libyan Civil War.[132] In the aftermath of Gaddafi's death, Russian President Vladimir Putin not only rebuked the United States and NATO for their involvement, claiming that "[Gaddafi] was killed without an investigation or trial…is that democracy?" but also began building a relationship with Khalifa Haftar, a former Gaddafi ally, warlord, and commander of the Libyan National Army (LNA). The Kremlin hoped that Haftar's resistance to the Government of National Accord (GNA) and control over eastern Libya would prevent further oil extraction contract cancellations—thus

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[130] Vanneman, "Soviet Foreign Policy for Angola/Namibia," 81–85.

[131] Ronald Bruce St. John, "The Soviet Penetration of Libya," *The World Today* 38, no. 4 (1982): 131–38; Elena Pokalova, "The Wagner Group in Africa: Russia's Quasi-State Agent of Influence," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, June 2, 2023, 5–6, https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2023.2231642.

[132] Pokalova, "The Wagner Group in Africa," 6.

minimizing financial losses for Russia—and create new opportunities for the construction of military bases on the Mediterranean.[133]

As the GNA rose to power, the Kremlin continued to solidify its relationship with Haftar. In 2015, Haftar visited Moscow, where he met with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and announced his hopes for greater cooperation with Russia in combating terrorism.[134] According to Oleg Krinitsyn, head of one PMSC known as RSB-Group, the Kremlin began deploying PMSCs to Libya soon after the 2015 meeting, who were responsible for removing mines in areas outside of Benghazi that had been cleared by LNA forces.[135] While it is clear that RSB-Group operated in Libya on the Russian state's behalf, it remains to be seen whether its activities there—primarily demining, security, and aircraft maintenance—were conducted independent of the Wagner Group, which arrived in Libya around October 2018.[136] Then, in November 2018, Haftar once again visited Moscow, where he met with Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and

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[133] Maxim Tkachenko, "Putin Points to U.S. Role in Gadhafi's Killing," *CNN*, December 15, 2011, https://www.cnn.com/2011/12/15/world/europe/russia-putin-libya/index.html; Pokalova, "The Wagner Group in Africa," 5–6; Chris Stephen, "Putin's Empire-Building Base Hunt Reaches Libya," Center for European Policy Analysis, January 9, 2025, https://cepa.org/article/putins-empire-building-base-hunt-reaches-libya/.

[134] "Libyan General Khalifa Haftar Meets Russian Minister to Seek Help," *The Guardian*, November 29, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/29/libyan-general-khalifa-haftar-meets-russian-minister-to-seek-help.

[135] Maria Tsvetkova, "Exclusive - Russian Private Security Firm Says It Had Armed Men in East Libya," *Reuters*, March 10, 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/russia-libya-contractors-idINKBN16H2GC/.

[136] Marten, "Russian Foreign Paramilitary Outfits beyond Wagner," 12–14; Инна Сидоркова, Полина Химшиашвили, and Роман Кирьянов, "На Посольство Ливии в Минске Напали Неизвестные," РБК, August 27, 2020, https://www.rbc.ru/politics/27/08/2020/5f476cf79a7947d41994778a; Robert Uniacke, "Libya Could Be Putin's Trump Card," *Foreign Policy* (blog), March 20, 2025, https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/07/08/wagner-group-libya-oil-russia-war/.

Yevgeny Prigozhin.[137] The initial contingent of Wagner fighters in Libya, which numbered between 800 and 2,000, was deployed only to "provide technical support for the maintenance of military equipment," but the paramilitary soon began trafficking arms and oil, conducting political influence operations, and participating in combat with the LNA.[138]

As the Wagner Group continued to take on an active role in Libya's Second Civil War, Prigozhin and the Russian Ministry of Defense began using its participation in LNA offensives against the Tripoli-based GNA to leverage access to military bases in Jufrah and Qardabiyah, which in turn facilitated further Wagner operations in neighboring Chad, Niger, and Sudan.[139] Wagner was also vital in coordinating the LNA's blockade on oil exports, which simultaneously deprived the GNA of billions of dollars in profit and delayed investments in Libyan energy, thus threatening the Russian energy industry's monopoly over the European market.[140] In this case, the Kremlin used the Wagner Group—a small paramilitary force—to support the LNA and its strategic objectives

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[137] "Supposed 'Troll Factory' Founder and Mercenary Kingpin Attends Talks between Russia's Defense Minister and the Head of the Libyan National Army," *Meduza*, November 9, 2018, https://meduza.io/en/news/2018/11/10/supposed-troll-factory-founder-and-mercenary-kingpin-attends-talks-between-russia-s-defense-minister-and-the-head-of-the-libyan-national-army.

[138] "Final Report of the Panel of Experts on Libya Established Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 1973 (2011)" (United Nations Security Council, March 8, 2021), 32, https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S_2021_229.pdf; Robert Uniacke, "Libya Could Be Putin's Trump Card," *Foreign Policy* (blog), March 20, 2025, https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/07/08/wagner-group-libya-oil-russia-war/; Pokalova, "The Wagner Group in Africa," 7–8.

[139] "Final Report of the Panel of Experts on Libya," 3–5.

[140] Uniacke, "Libya Could Be Putin's Trump Card."

throughout Africa, thus avoiding the political and financial costs of a traditional military intervention.

Wagner Group operations in the Second Libyan Civil War came to a head in 2019 when the LNA began an offensive known as Operation Flood of Dignity, seeking to recapture the capital of Tripoli from the GNA.[141] The Wagner Group was instrumental in the offensive, and participated in combat operations with Haftar's forces, performing "specialized military tasks…as artillery forward observation officers and forward air controllers, providing electronic counter-measures expertise and deploying as sniper teams" according to one UN report.[142] Moreover, approximately 2,000 Syrian fighters recruited by the "ISIS Hunters," a Wagner-affiliated company based in Syria, arrived in the country in early 2020 to bolster the LNA's numbers, where they served under Wagner officers for six-month contracts.[143] However, while the Wagner Group and its Syrian recruits provided invaluable combat expertise to the LNA offensive, it was not enough to retake Tripoli: Turkish military support to the GNA and drone strikes against

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[141] Candace Rondeaux, Oliver Imhof, and Jack Margolin, "The Abu Dhabi Express: Analyzing the Wagner Group's Libya Logistics Pipeline & Operations," Future Frontlines (New America, November 1, 2021), 8–9, https://www.newamerica.org/future-frontlines/reports/the-abu-dhabi-express/.https://www.newamerica.org/future-frontlines/reports/the-abu-dhabi-express/.

[142] "Letter Dated 8 March 2021 from the Panel of Experts on Libya Established Pursuant to Resolution 1973 (2011) Addressed to the President of the Security Council," March 8, 2021, 32, https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3905159.https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3905159.

[143] "Ukraine: Wagner Group Begins Relocating Syrian Fighters from Libya to Russia," Syrians for Truth and Justice, March 20, 2022, https://stj-sy.org/en/ukraine-wagner-group-begins-relocating-syrian-fighters-from-libya-to-russia/.

Wagner-operated Pantsir S1 surface-to-air missile (SAM) batteries ultimately stalled the LNA offensive, forcing Haftar to retreat in May 2020.[144]

The Wagner Group has maintained a consistent presence in Libya despite the strain that the invasion of Ukraine has placed on its forces. Following Yevgeny Prigozhin's death in the summer of 2023 and the MoD's subsequent efforts to restructure the organization, however, Wagner forces have continued operating in Libya as the "Africa Corps."[145] Increasing the Africa Corps' (AC) presence in Libya, a strategic portal to both the Mediterranean and North Africa, has been a key objective for the organization's new leader, Deputy Defense Minister Col.-Gen. Yunus-bek Yevkurov, but Libya's transformation into a hub for Russian operations started off slowly.[146] The ongoing offensive in Ukraine forced the MoD and GRU to temporarily place their operations in Libya and throughout the greater African theater on the back burner, but once Haftar and Putin reached a new agreement in late 2023, personnel deployments to Libya began increasing.[147] According to one report from Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, at least 1,800 Russian troops arrived in Libya in May 2024 following the

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[144] "Russian Fighters Flown out of Western Libya after Haftar Retreat," *Reuters*, May 25, 2020, sec. World, https://www.reuters.com/article/world/russian-fighters-flown-out-of-western-libya-after-haftar-retreat-idUSKBN231069/; Rondeaux, Imhof, and Margolin, "The Abu Dhabi Express," 10.

[145] Bryjka and Czerep, "Africa Corps," 11–13.

[146] Bryjka and Czerep, "Africa Corps," 21–22; Ben Dalton and Candace Rondeaux, "The Wagner Group Legacy: Reshaping Russia's Shadow Armies," New America, September 30, 2024, http://newamerica.org/future-frontlines/briefs/the-wagner-group-legacy/.

[147] "Putin's Move to Secure Libya Bases Is New Regional Worry for US," *Bloomberg.com*, November 5, 2023, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-11-05/putin-s-move-to-secure-libya-bases-is-new-regional-worry-for-us.

redeployment of "several hundred special forces servicemen" and "several thousand more Wagner PMC fighters" between February and April, though the true purpose of their deployment remains unknown.[148] Analysis by the Institute for the Study of War suggested the Kremlin deployed this force to Libya in the hopes of establishing a permanent naval base on its Mediterranean coast, whereas Jalel Harchaoui, a political scientist at the Royal United Services Institute, argued Russia increased its presence in Libya because it serves as "a strategic route to countries like Sudan, Niger, and beyond."[149]

With the AC contingent replenished, the Kremlin has dispersed its personnel to LNA-controlled locations throughout Libya and into Niger.[150] AC forces have most notably deployed to the Maaten al-Sarra airbase near Libya's border with Chad and Sudan, signaling a more permanent Russian presence in the Sahel and future offensive maneuvers from Haftar's LNA.[151] However, while the nature of the AC fighters' support for the LNA remains unknown as of March 2025, they are likely still training LNA forces, protecting Haftar and other key officials, and maintaining Russian equipment as

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[148] Редакция «Вёрстки», "«Готовится большая заварушка»: зачем Россия наращивает военное присутствие в Ливии - Вёрстка," May 10, 2024, https://verstka.media/rossiya-naraschivaet-voennoe-prisutstvie-v-livii.

[149] Liam Karr, "Africa File, May 16, 2024: Russian Outreach across Africa," *Institute for the Study of War* (blog), May 16, 2024, https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/africa-file-may-16-2024-russian-outreach-across-africa; "'A Big Mess Is Brewing' Thousands of Russian Fighters Are Flooding into Libya, Raising Concerns over What the Kremlin Might Be Planning," *Meduza*, May 16, 2024, https://meduza.io/en/feature/2024/05/16/a-big-mess-is-brewing.

[150] Bryjka and Czerep, "Africa Corps," 22.

[151] Nosmot Gbadamosi, "After Assad's Fall, Russia Looks to Libya and Sudan," *Foreign Policy*, March 20, 2025, https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/02/19/russia-putin-libya-sudan-naval-air-bases-syria-assad-fall/.

was standard during the Wagner period. At any rate, the Kremlin's decision to maintain a strong military presence in Libya through the AC clearly demonstrates that its ambitions for the Sahel and the greater African continent have not faltered, nor have its interests in using the Africa Corps and other MoD-run paramilitary organizations to achieve strategic objectives. At the same time, by maintaining an armed presence in Libya despite Haftar's failure to capture Tripoli, the Russian government has shown that it does not necessarily expect lasting peace between the GNA and LNA, or even within the LNA itself. Instead, the Kremlin chose to endure Haftar's unsuccessful offensive because, according to investigative journalist John Lechner, "there was no interest in throwing all the necessary resources behind [Haftar]," and it served Russia's strategic interests for the greater North African region to "maintain Haftar's dependence on the Kremlin and, therefore, Russian influence in an important country on NATO's southern flank."[152]

3.4: Conclusion

Comparison of the Soviet intervention in the Angolan Civil War and the Russian intervention in the Second Libyan Civil War reveals a number of key similarities. First is the parallel between the regimes' reliance on external or non-traditional armed forces to provide the bulk of the manpower: In Angola, the Soviet Union avoided having to commit a large number of its own troops by enlisting the help of Cuba, East Germany, North Korea, and North Vietnam, and in Libya, the Russian government has similarly spared itself the high costs of conventional military involvement by relying on the

[152] John Lechner, "The Tip of Russia's Spear: When Wagner Came to Libya," *The Baffler* (blog), February 24, 2025, https://thebaffler.com/latest/the-tip-of-russias-spear-lechner.

Wagner Group and its successor, the Africa Corps. While far from non-attributable, these forces enabled the Kremlin to pursue its military objectives in both theaters without suffering the political and economic costs of conventional military intervention.

It is also crucial to recognize that the Soviet intervention in the Angolan Civil War required a far more defensive strategy than its contemporary analogue in Libya, as the Soviet-backed MPLA maintained control of the capital Luanda for the majority of the conflict and was thus primarily concerned with preventing UNITA, FNLA, and South African forces from advancing further. While the Wagner Group was unsuccessful during Haftar's 2019–2020 offensive on Tripoli, it nonetheless succeeded in preserving his rule in eastern Libya, and prevented the GNA from establishing total control over the country. With this in mind, it becomes clear that the Soviet and later Russian reliance on proxy forces and small teams of advisors, specialists, and commandos has proven itself far more effective in defensive operations than offensive ones.

Moreover, the Eastern Bloc-aligned forces in Angola and their contemporary equivalents among PMSCs in Libya experienced consistent oversight and engagement with the Russian state and its defense and intelligence agencies. Though the number of Soviet troops in Angola likely never exceeded 2,000 even at the peak of the war, the military advisors, technicians, and interpreters that assisted the MPLA were often members of the KGB and GRU.[153] Similarly, the Wagner Group was always intricately

[153] Stephen Larrabee, "Moscow, Angola and the Dialectics of Détente," *The World Today* 32, no. 5 (1976): 177; Andrew and Mitrokhin, *The Mitrokhin Archive II*, 455; Jiri Valenta, "The Soviet-Cuban Intervention in Angola, 1975," *Studies in Comparative Communism* 11, no. 1/2 (1978): 22.

tied to the GRU because of its founder, Dmitry Utkin, and his experience as a commander in its 2nd *spetsnaz* brigade, and after its reorganization into the Africa Corps, the MoD has assumed an even more direct role in its management.[154] Though both campaigns relied heavily on unconventional forces (i.e., not conventional soldiers from the Soviet and Russian Armed Forces), intelligence and military officers' oversight should not be discounted, as it allowed the Kremlin and its security agencies to maintain control over the military action while keeping its physical footprint to a minimum.

Last and most obvious is the Soviet and Russian governments' shared decision to use unconventional forces—either from allied nations like Cuba or semi-state paramilitary organizations like Wagner—in pursuit of their strategic objectives. Support of the MPLA and LNA was and still is critical to the Soviet and Russian governments' long-term goals for Africa (e.g., securing vital natural resources, protecting their energy monopoly, and preventing European power projection). Thus, their willingness to use unconventional forces to achieve these goals demonstrates a clear willingness to innovate militarily and move away from traditional military interventions.

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[154] Pokalova, "The Wagner Group in Africa," 10; Åse Gilje Østensen and Tor Bukkvoll, "Russian Use of Private Military and Security Companies: The Implications for European and Norwegian Security" (Norwegian Defence Research Establishment, September 11, 2018), 25–26, https://www.cmi.no/publications/file/6637-russian-use-of-private-military-and-security.pdf.https://www.cmi.no/publications/file/6637-russian-use-of-private-military-and-security.pdf.

4. Conclusion

While the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan did not make use of proxy forces or even a cohesive IW strategy, the Angolan Civil War clearly represents an early prototype for later Russian proxy wars in the African continent. The initial invasion force in Afghanistan was comprised of some of the Soviet Armed Forces' most skilled units and seized control of the country very quickly, but it ultimately failed to defeat the *Mujahideen* in Afghanistan because it lacked a competent proxy—in this case, the Afghan Armed Forces—and was improperly equipped to fight a COIN campaign. In comparison, the Soviets refrained from deploying a conventional invasion force to Angola, and instead chose to rely on a small number of advisors to direct the greater Cuban, East German, and MPLA coalition. This strategy ultimately resulted in a military success for the Kremlin, since the MPLA emerged as the dominant Angolan political party by 1989 at a low political and human cost to the Soviet military.[155]

The Kremlin later modernized this same strategy of proxy warfare during the Libyan and Syrian Civil Wars, but instead of Cuban and East German troops, it utilized paramilitary organizations and PMSCs that could absorb the political and human costs of combat while still providing senior officials with advanced military capabilities. By replacing allied proxies with semi-state ones like the Wagner Group, the Kremlin successfully consolidated control over decision-making processes at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels of war, thus avoiding the diplomatic and logistical

[155] James Brooke, "Cuba Pulls 450 Soldiers Out of Angola," *The New York Times*, January 11, 1989, sec. World, https://www.nytimes.com/1989/01/11/world/cuba-pulls-450-soldiers-out-of-angola.html.

challenges of working in an international coalition. Moreover, paramilitary forces allowed the Kremlin to mount successful military operations in both nations at a fraction of the cost of those in Afghanistan and Angola, thus saving the nation the cost of a prolonged conventional intervention.

It is also important to note here that while the success or failure of the Kremlin's IW campaigns in Afghanistan and Angola largely depended upon their use of conventional or proxy forces, the nature of the campaigns also played a key role in determining their outcome. In Afghanistan, the Soviet Armed Forces—more specifically, *spetsnaz* units from the KGB and GRU—were highly successful during the offensive portion of the campaign, but once the initial offensive had concluded and the *Mujahideen* insurgency began, the occupying force was poorly equipped for a successful defensive. However, the Soviets experienced success in Angola because they entered the conflict focused on supporting the existing MPLA defensive, rather than compelling a conventional invasion force into an IW mission that it was not suited for.

In Syria, the Russian government experienced considerable success with its combined intervention force, composed primarily of mercenaries from the Wagner Group, GRU specialists, and other paramilitary officers, during both Palmyra Offensives. Yet while Russia's intervention in Syria resulted in offensive successes but a defensive failure following Bashir al-Assad's removal from power in December 2024, the Wagner

contingent in Libya failed to achieve Khalifa Haftar's offensive on Tripoli and succeeded only in defending LNA-controlled territory in the country's east afterwards.

In conclusion, the Russian Federation has adopted the Soviet strategy of proxy warfare for its current operations in Africa by eschewing allied support in favor of organizations like the Wagner Group and other semi-state paramilitary forces. The Kremlin's current IW strategy has proven itself to be a cost-effective and militarily viable option for not just President Putin, but also other members of the so-called "axis of autocracies," including the People's Republic of China, the Islamic Republic of Iran, and other nations seeking to exert influence in future armed conflicts.[156] China and Iran will undoubtedly continue investing in organizations like the Maritime Militia and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) to maintain a competitive advantage, for Russia's IW strategy using semi-state paramilitaries provides a cost-effective and plausibly deniable option to states wary of mounting a conventional armed intervention.[157]

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[156] James M. Lindsay, "Election 2024: How to Respond to the Axis of Autocracies," Council on Foreign Relations, October 25, 2024, https://www.cfr.org/blog/election-2024-how-respond-axis-autocracies.

[157] Daniel R. DePetris Kavanagh Jennifer, "The 'Axis of Evil' Is Overhyped," *Foreign Policy*, October 28, 2024, https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/08/14/russia-china-iran-north-korea-axis-evil-cooperation/.

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