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RUSSIAN HYBRID WARFARE IN SYRIA: AIRFORCE, PRIVATE MILITARY CONTRACTORS AND DIS-INFORMATION

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JCSP 43 DL

Exercise Solo Flight

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The fact is that mercenaries bring only slow, belated, unconvincing victories, then sudden, bewildering defeats.

– Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*
Chapter 12...*Concerning Mercenary Soldiers*

INTRODUCTION

The Russian Government officially intervened in the Syrian conflict in September 2015,¹ and began operations soon after. As reported in the media at the time, much of the operations were conducted by Russian air elements,² however, land elements would also engage in operations.³ The Russian deployment to Syria, was its first major engagement “outside of the borders of the former Soviet Union since [the end of the] Cold War,”⁴ however, their involvement in Syria proved to be more than a Russian attempt to halt the spread of the Islamic State (ISIS) and other terrorist organizations. Russia’s deployment is a proving ground for their refinement of *Hybrid Warfare*. Russia’s seeks to gain increased regional and global significance by undertaking air operations that targeted moderate opposition fighters, while on the ground they further refined their use of Private Military Companies (PMC’s), all the while wrapping the entire operation in a cloud of secrecy, dis-information, and propaganda. It will be shown that despite some international media’s positions that the Russian engagement ranged from tactically

¹ Hugo Spaulding, “Here’s how Russia covertly deployed military forces to Syria in September,” *Business Insider*, published 2 October 2015, <http://www.businessinsider.com/heres-how-russia-covertly-deployed-military-forces-to-syria-in-september-2015-10>.

² Andrew Osborn and Phil Stewart, “Russia begins Syria air strikes in its biggest Mideast intervention in decades,” *Reuters*, published 30 September 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-russia-idUSKCN0RU0MG20151001>.

³ Ben Quinn, “Russia's military action in Syria – timeline.” *The Guardian*, published 14 March 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/14/russias-military-action-in-syria-timeline>.

⁴ Shaun Walker, et al, “US accuses Russia of ‘throwing gasoline on the fire’ of Syrian civil war,” *The Guardian*, published 30 September 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/30/russia-launches-first-airstrikes-against-targets-in-syria-says-us>.

successful⁵ to some elements of a failure,⁶ what it actually was, was a strategic success in the concept development and refinement of *Hybrid Warfare*. Given this Russian success, the essay will establish a definition of *Hybrid Warfare* with respect to Russia, based on an assessment of their lessons learned from the engagement in Syria.

HYBRID WARFARE

Since at least 2005⁷ various western military publications^{8,9} and think-tank papers¹⁰ have sought to define *Hybrid Warfare*. The concept is now widely spread, and even has crept into main-stream media lexicon,¹¹ especially when discussing Russian involvement in the Ukraine, Syria, and the Baltics. Despite the growing use of the term *Hybrid Warfare*, there is no standard definition, and in fact, some authors have postulated that the entire term is meaningless.¹² Regardless, it is necessary to frame the conduct of Russian forces in Syria in some term or descriptor, and *Hybrid Warfare*, is the most suitable. In light of the variety of definitions, the parameters set out by Andrew Radin writing for the RAND Corporation, form the best starting point for discussion:

⁵ Ruslan Pukhov, “Moscow-based think tank director: Russia’s unexpected military victory in Syria,” *Defense News – Outlook*, published 10 December 2017, <https://www.defensenews.com/outlook/2017/12/11/moscow-based-think-tank-director-russias-unexpected-military-victory-in-syria/>.

⁶ Pavel K Baev, “Russia stumbles in the fog of Syrian war,” *Order from Chaos*, 21 February 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/02/21/russia-stumbles-in-the-fog-of-syrian-war/>.

⁷ Damien Van Puyvelde, “Hybrid War, Does It Even Exist,” *NATO Review*, 2015, accessed 22 May 2018, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/2015/also-in-2015/hybrid-modern-future-warfare-russia-ukraine/en/index.htm>.

⁸ Department of National Defence, *Strong, Secure Engaged* (Ottawa: Department of National Defence, 2017), 53.

⁹ Department of National Defence, *The Future Security Environment, 2013-2040* (Ottawa: Chief of Force Development, 2014), 143. NOTE: this is from an ABCA definition.

¹⁰ Frank G. Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars* (Arlington, Virginia: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, December 2007). http://www.potomac institute.org/images/stories/publications/potomac_hybridwar_0108.pdf.

¹¹ Leonid Bershidsky, “Putin Wants to Win, But Not at All Costs,” *Bloomberg News*, published 6 December 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2017-12-06/putin-wants-to-win-but-not-at-all-costs>.

¹² Damien Van Puyvelde.

... the term hybrid warfare, are best described as covert or deniable activities, supported by conventional or nuclear forces, to influence the domestic politics of target countries.¹³

This essay will look at how Russia used its air campaign, PMC's and manipulation of information in Syria allowing us to further develop an understanding and definition of *Hybrid Warfare*.

RUSSIA'S SYRIAN GOALS

Although all of the Russian goals for operations in Syria have remained opaque, the main stated goals appeared to be: the defeat of Islamic terrorists (primarily ISIS); and the prevention of a regime change.¹⁴ Additionally, a successful intervention in Syria could allow Russia to: make further in-roads in the Middle-East, re-establishing the influence that it lost when the Soviet empire collapsed; re-establish Russia as a power on the world stage breaking out of the American imposed political isolation;¹⁵ test new and pre-production equipment; and, gain expeditionary combat experience for its forces.¹⁶ What these stated and inferred goals which have been discussed in the media don't refer to was Russia's refinement of *Hybrid Warfare* techniques.

¹³ Andrew Radin, *Hybrid Warfare in the Baltics: Threats and Potential Responses* (Santa Monica California: RAND Corporation, 2017), www.rand.org/t/RR1577, Page 5.

¹⁴ Nathan Hodge, "Putin Declares Victory in Surprise Stopover in Syria," *Wall Street Journal*, published 11 December 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/putin-declares-victory-in-surprise-stopover-in-syria-1512994876>.

¹⁵ Michael Kofman, and Matthew Rojansky, "What Kind of Victory for Russia in Syria?," *Military Review*, March-April 2018, <http://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/Online-Exclusive/2018-OLE/Russia-in-Syria/>, page 10.

¹⁶ Leonid Bershidsky, "Putin's Goals in Syria Went Beyond Saving Assad," *Bloomberg Opinion*, published 4 January 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2018-01-04/putin-s-goals-went-beyond-saving-assad>. Note: this article draws information from a www.kp.ru article by General Valery Gerasimov published in Russian.

RUSSIAN AIR OPERATIONS WITHIN HYBRID WARFARE

Russia conducted a conventional air campaign in Syria, flying primarily ground attack missions. While, the aircrew and ground support staff to support this mission formed the bulk of the declared personnel deployed to Syria. Comparatively, the Russian commitment of airframes was relatively light¹⁷ (when compared to the number of available aircraft of the United States and its allies), and they dropped on the most part non-guided munitions. Nonetheless, during operations, Russia deployed/showcased two SU-57 (formerly T-50) stealth fighters that are not yet in production.¹⁸ Despite the low number of airframes, Russia flew a high number of sorties to attack terrorists on the ground. However, in addition to inflicting losses on opposition fighters, Russia has been heavily criticized for the number of civilian casualties that they have caused.¹⁹

The *Hybrid Warfare* aspect of the employment of the air force comes from the way the Russian Government combined conventional air assets flying in a conventional role, with an over-arching information campaign. President Bashar al-Assad, the pre-civil war leader of Syria in 2015 was still (although barely) clinging to power, and faced opposition from a number of factions. The opposition groups were a mixed bag, running the gamut from radical extremist organizations such as ISIS, to moderate rebel fighters, some of whom were supported by the United States. Given this spectrum, somewhat surprisingly and contrary to the stated goals of destruction of ISIS, the Russian air campaign disproportionately targeted moderate rebel fighters and opposition civilian populations. The Russian's realized that the moderate rebel fighters remained a risk to the Bashar al-Assad government, and those elements would not be targeted by

¹⁷ Pukhov ... Note: 30-40 aircraft. Although the source is the director of a Russian think tank, the figure appears similar to numbers stated in western media.

¹⁸ Daniel Brown, "These are the 11 types of Russian military jets and planes known to be stationed in Syria," *Business Insider*, 26 February 2018, <http://www.businessinsider.com/these-are-the-10-russian-military-aircraft-stationed-in-syria-2017-10>.

¹⁹ Nagieb Khaja and editorial staff, "Syria: Under Russia's Fist," *Al-Jazeera*, published 25 February 2016, <https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/peopleandpower/2016/02/syria-russia-fist-160225053929748.html>.

the United States. If Russia concentrated its efforts on eliminating moderate elements while also claiming in the media to be attacking ISIS, the Americans would be forced to engage ISIS anyway. Thus Russia attacked the moderates as a policy:

Russia correctly identified that the West would not back al-Qaeda affiliates or other jihadist groups against Assad's regime and therefore its forces simply had to focus on killing the moderate opposition. In terms of military strategy, the Islamic State, Ahrar al Sham, and Jabhat al-Nusra had far more fighters, but only the non-jihadist opposition represented an alternative to Assad's regime.²⁰

The Russians were able to read the battle-space and understood that they did not need to eliminate ISIS, but rather they only needed to keep al-Assad in power, and to do that their air force only needed to concentrate on the moderates.

Thus, the Russian's were able to economize their air assets' efforts, employing less resources than the United States, while gaining the effect that they were looking for (protection of the al-Assad regime). This conventional air campaign, against groups that were less extremist, was coupled with an information campaign that focused on their success against ISIS and other hardline terror networks.²¹ Consequently, the Russian Government was able to shape the conversation in Russia, and influence world media, as to their success fighting ISIS from the air. This hybrid approach also allowed them to criticize and frame the American actions in Syria as comparably ineffective.²²

²⁰ Michael Kofman, "The Misadventures of Russia and the United States in Syria: Complete Strategy Implosion Edition" *War on the Rocks*, published 11 October 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/10/the-misadventures-of-russia-and-the-united-states-in-syria-complete-strategy-implosion-edition/>.

²¹ Unknown, "Russian Military Sums Up Results Of Anti-Terrorist Operation In Syria Since Start Of 2018," *SouthFront.org*, published 23 May 2018, <https://southfront.org/russian-military-sums-up-results-of-anti-terrorist-operations-in-syria-since-start-of-2018/>. Note: although SouthFront claims to be independent, asking for donations to sustain its operations, it appears to be a Russian sympathising propaganda forum, simultaneously published in English, German, Russian, Arabic and Farsi (sp?). It also translates and comments on Russian news publications.

²² Pukhov.

So was this *hybridization* of air power and propaganda effective, and what did the Russian's learn? The Russian's had a relatively light commitment, however they gained a standing on the international stage, allowing President Putin to interact with the heads of state of such divergent regional powers as Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia.²³ Additionally, the showcasing of Russian military technology (such as the SU-35) has been a boost to arms sales, with exports and sales spiking to an all-time high.²⁴ Russia learned that it could make strategic gains (and arms sales) with some kinetic conventional forces coupled with an appropriate information and diplomatic campaign. The air campaign was conventional, conducted in a unique way and was a successful application of *Hybrid Warfare*.

RUSSIAN PMC's

Unfortunately, Russia denies or attempts to suppress its use of PMC's in warzones,²⁵ and this complicates the study of their employment. Therefore, it is first necessary to spend time to examine the overall situation and the background of the known entities at play in order to make the connections between Russia and the PMC's. This will be done before discussing PMC use in *Hybrid Warfare* and what Russia may have learned.

²³ Hodge.

²⁴ Andrei Akulov, "Russia's Arms Sales to Middle East Countries Spike to Record-High Levels," *Strategic Culture Foundation*, published 18 November 2017, <https://www.strategic-culture.org/news/2017/11/18/russia-arms-sales-middle-east-countries-spike-record-high-levels.html>. Note: the author of this article is a retired Russian Lieutenant-Colonel, however a report from al-Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/04/syria-war-showroom-russian-arms-sales-160406135130398.html>, reports a similar situation in 2016.

²⁵ Maria Tsvetkova and Anton Zverev, "Russian Soldiers Are Secretly Dying In Syria," *Reuters in the Huffington Post*, published 3 November 2016, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/russian-soldiers-secretly-dying-syria_us_581b232ee4b01a82df64e63d.

Overall Situation

Russia appears to have developed a system of PMCs to support direct kinetic engagements (i.e. seeking out and engaging in combat). This differs from the Western use of PMC's where PMCs are contracted for auxiliary support (logistics and administrative support, guard duties):²⁶

Whereas the Americans used mercenaries [PMC's] for security and stabilization after gaining and holding new territory, the Russians use mercenaries [PMC's] to fight the battles themselves.²⁷

Russia has previously made use of PMCs in the Ukrainian conflicts,²⁸ and continues to do so in Syria. Further, unlike the West which has acknowledged using PMC's [contractors], the Russian Government even in very recent reports has continued to disavow knowledge of Russian PMC's in Syria.²⁹

Interestingly, PMC's are illegal in Russia.³⁰ In 2012 President Putin saw the potential of PMC's as "instruments to further national interests without the direct involvement of the government."³¹ The Russian Government has tried several times to change the laws concerning

²⁶ Owen Matthews, "PUTIN'S SECRET ARMIES WAGED WAR IN SYRIA—WHERE WILL THEY FIGHT NEXT?" *Newsweek.com*, published 17 January 2018, <http://www.newsweek.com/2018/01/26/putin-secret-army-waged-war-syria-782762.html>.

²⁷ Sabra Ayres, "Russia's shadowy world of military contractors: independent mercenaries, or working for the Kremlin?" *LATimes.com*, published 18 February 2018, <http://www.latimes.com/world/europe/la-fg-russia-mercenaries-20180218-story.html>.

²⁸ Illia Ponomarenko, "SBU says Russia's Wagner mercenaries involved in Donbas war," *Kyiv Post*, Published 7 October 2017, <https://www.kyivpost.com/ukraine-politics/sbu-readies-charge-russias-wagner-mercenaries-war-donbas.html>.

²⁹ Oliver Carroll, "Hiding in plain sight: Russia's private mercenaries and the lengths Moscow goes to deny them," *the Independent*, published 17 February 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/syria-civil-war-russia-wagner-private-mercenaries-sdf-reaction-kremlin-a8214811.html>.

³⁰ Ayres.

³¹ Pierre Sautreuil, "Believe It or Not, Russia Dislikes Relying on Military Contractors," *War is Boring*, published 9 March 2016, <https://warisboring.com/believe-it-or-not-russia-dislikes-relying-on-military-contractors/>. Note – quote of Putin in this text is attributed to Putin, but without context to where it was spoken.

PMC's (in 2014, 2016,³² and again in 2018³³), however, amended legislation has not been passed as both the FSB (national) security agency and the Ministry of Defense were concerned about "tens of thousands of uncontrollable Rambos turning their weapons against the government."³⁴ Thus as of early 2018, Russian PMC's remained technically illegal despite their ongoing employment.

PMC Wagner

The largest and most well-known (or at least most reported on) PMC working in Syria is a company known as PMC Wagner (ChVK Vagner in some spellings), however they remains an elusive entity. What is known is that PMC Wagner is based in Russia but is registered in Argentina (to avoid Russian mercenary laws).³⁵ The founder is reported to be Dmitry Utkin, who had served as a Lieutenant-Colonel (potentially still in the reserves) in a Special Forces brigade of Russian military intelligence (the GRU). It also appears that he previously worked for a PMC known as the Slavonic Corps,³⁶ before founding Wagner in 2014. Despite running a company working in the *grey-zone* of Russian law, Utkin has been photographed with President Vladimir Putin, and may have been honoured with an Order of Courage medal.³⁷

Further, Wagner is reported to be backed by Oligarch Yevgeny Prigozhin, nicknamed "Putin's Chef" due to his close ties to the Kremlin and being the major caterer to the Russian

³² Sautreuil.

³³ Vladimir Isachenkov, "Russia Seeks to Regulate Private Military Contractors." *Associated Press*, 14 February 2018, <https://apnews.com/amp/f4bbb531e5b49df96652536afb66372>.

³⁴ Sautreuil.

³⁵ Allison Quinn, "Vladimir Putin sent Russian mercenaries to 'fight in Syria and Ukraine'," *The Telegraph*, 30 March 2016, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/03/30/vladimir-putin-sent-russian-mercenaries-to-fight-in-syria-and-uk/>.

³⁶ Laurence Peter, "Syria war: Who are Russia's shadowy Wagner mercenaries?" *BBC.com*, published 20 February 2018, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-43167697>.

³⁷ Aleksandr Gostev, Robert Coalson, "Russia's Paramilitary Mercenaries Emerge From The Shadows," *Radio Free Europe*, published 12 December 2016, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-paramilitary-mercenaries-emerge-from-the-shadows-syria-ukraine/28180321.html>.

military.³⁸ Prigozhin also appears to own Evro Polis, an oil trading firm with interests in Syria.³⁹ In the West, Prigozhin is most famously known for being indicted in the United States for running a “troll factory” that meddled in the 2016 American presidential election.⁴⁰

Russian Government and PMC Wagner

Despite being illegal, Russia has invested considerable interest in PMC Wagner. Several investigative journalist have identified the Wagner training facility in Russia which is immediately beside, possibly inside, a Russian Ministry of Defence Special Forces training base located near the town of Molmino.⁴¹ Further researchers have tracked returning Russian PMC fighters arriving from Syria who are moved back into the base in Molmino.⁴² In addition to hosting the training for PMC Wagner, it also appears that serving Russian military members are assisting in training PMC Wagner. The SBU [Ukrainian intelligence service] has publically identified 26 Russian officers who have worked as instructors in combat training for PMC Wagner.⁴³

PMC Wagner *soldiers* have no contract or relationship with the Russian Defense Ministry,⁴⁴ which makes it easier for Russia to continue to deny their existence. Despite this, multiple sources have been able to determine that the PMC’s were paying their members \$4000-

³⁸ Peter.

³⁹ Isachenkov.

⁴⁰ Matthew Luxmoore, “Russian Journalist Who Reported on Secretive Paramilitary Dies,” *The New York Times*, 16 April 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/16/world/europe/maksim-borodin-journalist-dead-russia.html>.

⁴¹ John Sparks, “Revealed: Russia's 'Secret Syria Mercenaries',” *Sky News*, published 10 August 2016, <https://news.sky.com/story/revealed-russias-secret-syria-mercenaries-10529248>.

⁴² “A covert Russian mission in Syria uncovered,” Reuters video, 1:59, posted by “Reuters”, 25 April 2018, <https://uk.reuters.com/video/2018/04/25/a-covert-russian-mission-in-syria-uncver?videoid=421033449>.

⁴³ “Ukraine’s SBU identifies chief instructor of Ukrainian unit at Russia’s PMC Wagner,” *Unian.info*, published 7 May 2018, <https://www.unian.info/war/10107812-ukraine-s-sbu-identifies-chief-instructor-of-ukrainian-unit-at-russia-s-pmc-wagner.html>.

⁴⁴ Owen Matthews, “PUTIN’S SECRET ARMIES WAGED WAR IN SYRIA—WHERE WILL THEY FIGHT NEXT?” *Newsweek.com*, published 17 January 2018, <http://www.newsweek.com/2018/01/26/putin-secret-army-waged-war-syria-782762.html>.

\$5000 USD per month.^{45,46} When this is compared to the average Russian military wage between 2014-2017 of 62,000 Rubles per month (approximately \$1010 USD per month at today's exchange rate) it can be seen why joining a PMC is enticing if not encouraged for former Russian service members.

Based on the evidence gathered by investigative journalists, as well as the photographic evidence of PMC Wagner leadership with President Vladimir Putin, it can be safely stated, for the purposes of investigating Russian use of *Hybrid Warfare*, that Russia has actively used PMC Wagner as a contractor. It is not clear what the command relationship is between the Russian Government and PMC Wagner, but based on the evidence gathered it appears that they are likely directly involved in the tasking and employment of PMC Wagner. This essay will assume that, for the most part, PMC Wagner is given tasks and objectives similar to Russian Army or Russian Special Forces units. Unfortunately, with the media's concentration on identifying the elusive PMC Wagner, it is not clear what other Russian PMC elements may also be operating in Syria.⁴⁷

Early Employment of PMC's in Syria

Despite PMC Wagner's infamy, they were not the first group of Russian contractors to fight in Syria. In September/October 2013 a group of mercenaries under the company name Slavonic Corps went to Syria. The Slavonic Corps was either poached from, or a subsidiary of, the Moran Security Group, although Moran Security Group claimed they were not involved. Like PMC Wagner, the Slavonic Corps was registered outside side of Russia (in Hong Kong).⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Michael Kofman, and Matthew Rojansky... Page 17.

⁴⁶ Peter.

⁴⁷ Note: A few media sources have mentioned PMC TURAN (<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4973598/Russian-mercenaries-buying-virgin-wives-75-Syria.html>), however some careful sleuthing by <https://citeam.org/turan-pmc/>, seems to indicate TURAN is a fabrication.

⁴⁸ Paul Mutter, "Cossacks for Hire," *Souciant*, published 19 February 2014, <http://souciant.com/2014/02/cossacks-for-hire/>.

Who hired the Slavonic Corps remains somewhat of a mystery, however they were sent to Syria to guard an oil installation, that turned out not to be in Syrian Government control. The mission to retake the oil field was a failure and they left Syria before the end of their contract.

What is interesting in a *Hybrid Warfare* concept with respect to the Slavonic Corps is what happened on their return to Russia. The returning members were met at the airport by the FSB (the Russian Security Service) and had their phones' memory searched/confiscated, they were questioned and forced to sign non-disclosure agreements. Two of the executives were arrested and charged under the never before used criminal code article for mercenary activities.⁴⁹ This is note-worthy from a Russian lessons-learned perspective and likely shaped how they treated the subsequent employment of PMC Wagner and may be a harbinger of what will face PMC Wagner in the future. The Russian politicians realise if they are not closely associated with the PMC group, and if there are failures then those that can be held to pay the price are the organizers and soldiers and not the politicians. This may be a factor in why the law against PMC's has not been overturned or re-written, as it gives the government a legal way out of inconvenient failures.

PMC Wagner and the Battle of Palmyra

The official Russian narrative tells how in March 2017 the Syrian Army backed by Russian air-power and supported by Russian troops and special forces retook the city of Palmyra which was capped off with a victory concert in the ancient amphitheater by Russian conductor

⁴⁹ Unknown, "The Last Battle of the 'Slavonic Corps'," *Interpreter*, published 16 November 2013, <http://www.interpretermag.com/the-last-battle-of-the-slavonic-corps/>. Note: this is a translation of an article originally in Russian by Fontanka.

Valery Gergiev.⁵⁰ A victorious celebration after retaking the city with relatively few casualties to Russian service members and Russian Special Forces who were lauded for their participation in the retaking of the city.⁵¹

What has since been learned points towards a decisive application of *Hybrid Warfare* on the part of the Russians. PMC Wagner was relied upon to soften up and retake the city and likely suffered high casualties as a result of being “the first to fight.”⁵² However, as they are *off the books*, the Russian Government continues to deny knowledge of PMC Wagner casualties. This sacrifice of PMC Wagner *soldiers* has been seen as a failure by some of the PMC Wagner veterans that investigative journalists have tracked down:

The Wagner fighters accused their commanders of sending them on 'suicide missions' designed to 'soften-up' the opposition before Syrian Army troops were sent in.

Alexander [PMC Wagner veteran] recounted the battle for the city of Palmyra, conducted earlier this year.

He said: "During the storming of Palmyra, we were used as cannon fodder. You could say that. Reconnaissance went forward first so they could observe and report. I knew three in that group - two died before they got to the city. From my assault company, 18 died. After us, those chickens from Assad's army followed and finished the job but we did most of the work."

The official number of Russians killed in Syria stands at 19. However, the Wagner fighters told Sky News they believed hundreds of their fellow employees have been killed.⁵³

⁵⁰ Luke Harding, “Palmyra hosts Russian concert after recapture by Syrian forces,” *The Guardian*, published 5 May 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/05/palmyra-amphitheatre-hosts-russian-concert-after-recapture-by-syrian-forces>.

⁵¹ Unknown, “Russian Special Forces actively participated in second liberation of Palmyra from ISIS,” *South Front*, published 3 March 2017, <https://southfront.org/russian-special-forces-actively-participated-in-second-liberation-of-palmyra-from-isis/>.

⁵² Will Stewart “Russian mercenaries captured by ISIS 'are executed after refusing to reject Christianity and become Muslim',” *DailyMail.com*, published 6 October 2017, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4955614/Two-Russian-mercenaries-executed-ISIS.html>.

⁵³ Sparks.

However, in the context of *Hybrid Warfare*, this is not a failure. The loss of PMC Wagner versus the potential loss of Russian soldiers is a strategic victory for the Russian Government which “avoid[s] losses among official soldiers and keep[s] the image of a successful combat operation.”⁵⁴ President Putin has learned from history, understanding how the high losses in Afghanistan ended the Soviet Union and those in Chechnya cost Boris Yeltsin his presidency. The sacrifice of PMC Wagner vice Russian soldiers is the successful and intended outcome.⁵⁵

This blurring of lines has also allowed Russia to up sell the prestige of their special forces while obfuscating the facts about who was conducting the fighting.⁵⁶ This confusion is seen in a minor sentence in a larger article by the Washington Post describing the action in Palmyra:

It is unclear whether the equipment and the photos are from the same soldier, as some reports indicate that the soldiers from the unit pictured on the phone belong to a contracting group, not Russian special forces.⁵⁷

PMC Wagner served its purpose well as an element, if not sacrificial lamb, in the study of *Hybrid Warfare* in Palmyra.

The Future of PMC Wagner

The fate of PMC Wagner is still being written, or at least in open source reporting it is. On 7 February 2018, a PMC Wagner column attacked/probed a United States (and allied forces) position in the in the Deir el-Zour province in eastern Syria. This attack countered by the Americans with “F-15E attack jets, B-52 strategic bombers, AC-130 gunships, Apache attack

⁵⁴ Stewart.

⁵⁵ Bershidsky.

⁵⁶ “Further Developments in Syrian Civil War – Russian Special Forces,” *iHLS*, published 15 July 2017, <https://i-hls.com/archives/77544>.

⁵⁷ Thomas Gibbons-Neff, “How Russian special forces are shaping the fight in Syria,” *Washington Post*, published 29 March 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2016/03/29/how-russian-special-forces-are-shaping-the-fight-in-syria/?utm_term=.be14bef58010.

helicopters and Reaper drones.”⁵⁸ The American counter attacks inflicted heavy losses on the column with the current open source assessments running in the 100-300 casualty range with potentially 100 fatalities,⁵⁹ figures that Russia continues to deny:

"Reports about the deaths of dozens or hundreds of citizens are classic disinformation," [Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova] said. "There were not 400, not 200, not 1,000, and not 10."⁶⁰

The opinions of why PMC Wagner would attack an American position has ranged from a probing attack as a proxy war by President Putin,⁶¹ to the theory that Wagner had fallen out with the Kremlin and was now working independently:

Wagner functioned as an autonomous army and accepted missions from non-Russian groups, led to rising tensions with officials both on the ground in Syria and in Moscow's corridors of power.

In early 2016 the group lost the trust of -- and financing from -- Russia's defence ministry, according to various reports. This led "Prigozhin to seek other contracts, such as the one with Damascus whereby Wagner would liberate oil and gas fields and infrastructure in exchange for 25 percent of production".⁶²

⁵⁸ Isachenkov.

⁵⁹ Maria Tsvetkova, "Russian toll in Syria battle was 300 killed and wounded: sources," *Reuters*, published 15 February 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-casualtie/russian-toll-in-syria-battle-was-300-killed-and-wounded-sources-idUSKCN1FZ2DZ>.

⁶⁰ Unknown, "Moscow: Five Russian Fighters May Have Been Killed In U.S. Strikes In Syria," *Radio Free Europe*, updated 15 February 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-five-russian-fighters-killed-syria-air-strikes-united-states/29041741.html>.

⁶¹ Eli Lake, "Don't Be Fooled: Russia Attacked U.S. Troops in Syria," *Bloomberg*, published 16 February 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2018-02-16/russia-attacked-u-s-troops-in-syria>.

⁶² Thibault Marchand, "'Wagner Group': the mercenaries serving Putin in Syria," *France24.com*, published 22 March 2018, <http://www.france24.com/en/20180322-wagner-group-mercenaries-serving-putin-syria>.

However, the best analysis may come from Michael Kofman:

This episode may be due to poor coordination, deliberate probing, or as often happens in war – a confluence of events yields compound risk as mistakes and misjudgments stack.⁶³

Independent action or directed by the Kremlin, Russia will be able to glean important lessons from the destruction of the column on 7 February 2018. Russia will be able to analyse the American response and make adjustments in the future, safe in the knowledge that the defeat of PMC Wagner can be handled if required like the defeat of the Slavonic Corps, by rounding up and jailing a few figure heads if necessary.

WHAT RUSSIA HAS LEARNED

The Russian experiment in Syria has likely gleaned a treasure trove of technical information on the capabilities of their equipment from aircraft to air defense, as well, based on the events of 7 February 2018, the combat capacities of American ground attack aircraft.

However more important is the *Hybrid Warfare* lessons that they have learned or re-enforced:

1. In a multi-combatant fight, attack a weak enemy (i.e. the moderate opposition) and leave your rival (i.e. the United States) with the task of taking on the extremists.
2. Concurrently run an information operations campaign to allow you to deny responsibility, or accept credit.
3. Use expendable troops to save your own, even in Russia high casualties can be politically unacceptable.
4. PMC's can substitute for Special Forces, the information operations campaign can accept the credit if the operations go well.

⁶³ Michael Kofman, "U.S. Strikes and Russian PMC Casualties in Syria – Fact vs Fiction" *Russian Military Analysis*, published 14 February 2018, <https://russianmilitaryanalysis.wordpress.com/2018/02/14/u-s-strikes-and-russian-pmc-casualties-in-syria-fact-vs-fiction/>.

5. PMC's can serve the states interest, however, if things go bad, they can be rounded up and placed in jail.

This essay started by framing the question of *Hybrid Warfare* using a definition proposed by the RAND Corporation:

...the term hybrid warfare, are best described as covert or deniable activities, supported by conventional or nuclear forces, to influence the domestic politics of target countries.⁶⁴

Re-looking at this definition, based on the Russian experience we can see that much of the definition holds up. In Syria, Russia (as far has been reported) did not use or threaten to use nuclear forces, however there is no reason to remove that reference from the definition. What is confusing and needs clarification in the definition is the portion that says: "to influence domestic politics of target countries". In the Russian Syrian mission, Russia had multiple target countries, and Syria was likely the least significant. Russia likely sought to influence: Turkey, Iran, Israel, and Saudi Arabia, and they definitely sought to make an impression with the United States. As such it is proposed that this portion should read: "to impact the policies, and influence the politics of designated countries." This modification does several things, it removes the domestic aspect of the original definition clearly opening up the influence to both domestic and international policies of the target countries. Further, by removing the term "target", which conveys a sense of direct kinetic action, it has the effect of allowing the practitioner of *Hybrid Warfare* to cast a wider net of whom they wish to influence. Thus *Hybrid Warfare* can be defined as:

...covert or deniable activities, supported by conventional or nuclear forces, *to impact the policies, and influence the politics of designated countries.*

⁶⁴ Radin.

CONCLUSION

The Russian engagement in the Syrian conflict proved to be an opportunity for Russia to refine the application and understanding of *Hybrid Warfare*. Based on open-source references, it was shown that Russia combined a conventional air campaign and the covert use of PMC's along with an information campaign that sought to suppress and deny information. Although the story has not fully played out, Bashar al-Assad remains in power in Syria, and is in a much strengthened position. This is combined with the collapse of ISIS, has allowed Russia to achieve its stated two goals. What the conflict also allowed was the display of Russian military hardware and increased sales, increased influence in the region and globally, and a laboratory to test *Hybrid Warfare* techniques.

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