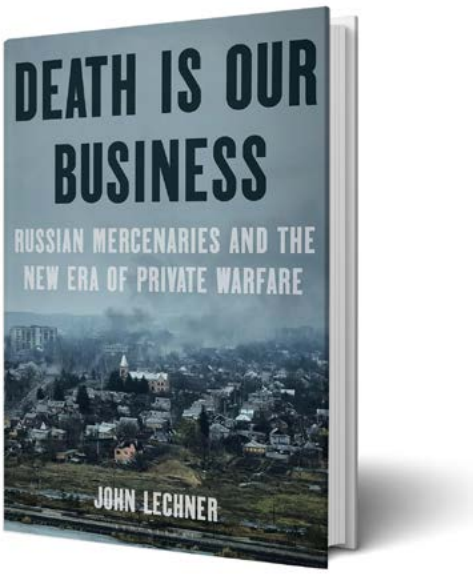
review essay

The Russian Way of War
Death is Our Business: Russian Mercenaries and the New Era of Private Warfare



Reviewed by Yong Lee

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Since 9/11, the phrase "civilian military contractor" has become familiar to defense analysts and writers. Military contractors took on valuable security roles in Afghanistan and Iraq, protecting VIPs, installations, and lines of communication, often taking similar risks as soldiers on the battlefield. In most cases, military contractors were former soldiers who continued their calling. The expansion of civilian security roles made military contractors a permanent fixture in war zones, and purveyors of these contractors became known as private military companies (PMCs).

Within the past 10 years, Russia's Wagner PMC has become the most well-known military contractor in the world, fighting in Africa, Syria, and Ukraine. We do not know the history of Wagner's record in battle, but the popular perception is that its soldiers regularly outperformed the Russian Army. This is understandable, considering the Russian military is a conscript force, while Wagner soldiers are veterans with prior military service. This began to change in 2022 when Wagner started recruiting Russian prisoners to form penal battalions after the invasion of Ukraine.

American freelance journalist John Lechner, in his first major book, chronicles the rise and fall of Wagner PMC. *Death is Our Business* in its essence is a biography of one man, Yvgeny Prigozhin, his rise to prominence, and the company he founded less than 10 years before his death. Prigozhin was born in St. Petersburg in 1961, when the city was still known as Leningrad. What people remember about Prigozhin is his distinct look, with a shaved head and a natural scowl, and his humble and troubled beginning. According to Lechner, "in his youth, Prigozhin spent nine years in prison for robbery and fraud. After his release, he claimed he sold hot dogs until he had enough money and connections to enter the restaurant business." (8)

Whether Prigozhin was a hot dog vendor or not is not certain. What we do know is that by 1997 he owned a popular restaurant in St. Petersburg and one of his clients

was the city's mayor, Vladimir Putin. Thus started Prigozhin's unlikely rise to power, as "Putin's chef." As Putin climbed his way up the Russian hierarchy, so did Prigozhin. Taking advantage of his home town ties with the most powerful man in the country, Prigozhin expanded his role from a restaurateur to a government contractor, providing meals to Russia's school children and the military. Prigozhin's food empire did not stop there. He also catered state dinners and served President Bush twice during state visits in 2002 and 2006. (38)

Prigozhin's rise was steady but it wasn't until 2014, following Russia's occupation of Donbas and Crimea, that he not only fed Russia's Army but started providing the government with soldiers-for-hire as well. (20) Climbing up the social ladder in Putin's circle meant displaying loyalty, personally to Putin and to Mother Russia. Lechner notes that "the war in Donbas was yet another chance to showcase one's patriotism" and to improve his status with the Boss. (56) To do this, Prigozhin, a man of Jewish descent, teamed up with a Russian neo-Nazi with an SS tattoo on his neck, a former special forces soldier named Dimitry Utkin. "Wagner" was Utkin's radio call sign in the field, an homage to the German composer known for his anti-Semitism and for being a favorite among Nazis. (56) We do not know if Prigozhin had any personal qualms about Utkin, but he had something Prigozhin needed: fighting men in the field and military experience. For Prigozhin, military contracting meant diversifying his holdings and providing Putin a service the government needed, experienced soldiers in eastern Ukraine.

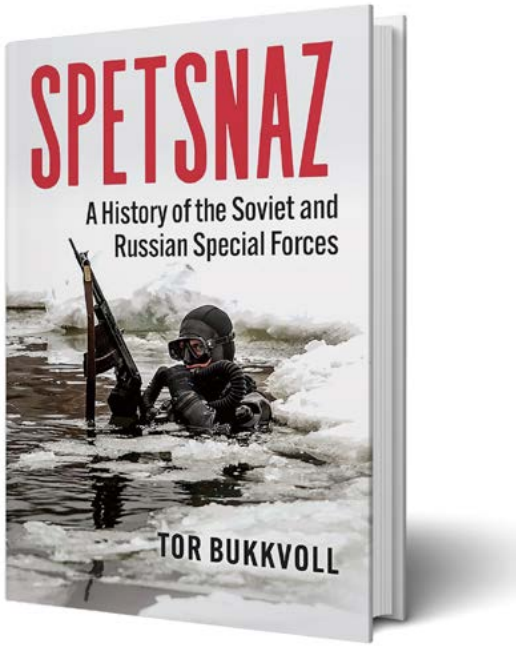
An ex-felon with no prior connections to business elites or officials before Putin started frequenting his restaurant, Prigozhin was not embraced among the president's courtiers. Although he became a wealthy man, Russia's nouveau riche looked down on him as a former prisoner and a butler at state dinners. Taking advantage of Russia's annexation of Crimea and invasion of eastern Ukraine in 2014, Prigozhin reinvented himself as a military leader. While Utkin led the military operation, Prigozhin became Wagner's public face. It's a role he apparently relished. The entire world knew him, with the Western media regularly touting Wagner as Russia's most effective fighting force. No one could ignore him now. According to Lechner, eventually the international fame that accompanied Wagner "whipped his ego into ever more dangerous proportions and he started losing his ability to calculate risk effectively." (209)

Wagner marched the globe with Russia's muscular foreign policy in the 2010s. It guarded Russia's friends and interests in the Middle East and Africa and faced off against the US military in Syria. Yet there was no amount of loyalty and martial prowess Wagner could display that could fulfill Prigozhin's need for acceptance and recognition. Indeed, Prigozhin had to face the indignity of Russia's entrenched elites forming their own PMCs and competing against him for contracts, muscling him out of a market that he pioneered. Even the Russian gas giant Gazprom got into the PMC business. (207) For Prigozhin, his fate as a perpetual outsider was too much to bear.

No one will know for certain why, in June 2023, Prigozhin decided to march toward Moscow in rebellion, trying to settle a personal score with Russia's defense minister, Sergei Shoigu. Lechner presents two possible motives. One, Prigozhin believed that the Ministry of Defense (MOD) had withheld support from Wagner during the group's brutal fight against Ukrainian defenders in the battle for Bakhmut. Second, he wanted to prevent moves by MOD to take operational control of Wagner forces. Military contractors following orders from the government that hired them seems logical, but that is not how Prigozhin saw it. He saw it as a personal insult, yet another example of elites trying to take away something he had built. Prigozhin probably thought he could do a better job leading the MOD then Shoigu, and, overestimating his own self-importance, began publicly airing his grievances against the defense minister.

This turn in 2023 probably sealed Prigozhin's fate, months before he marched toward Moscow. Publicly calling out Putin's defense minister, after years of MOD largess, was not going to help Prigozhin move up the political ladder or maintain his status. Biting the hand that fed him may have been the final act, lashing out against the loss of future contracts and return to ignominy.

Spetsnaz: A History of the Soviet and Russian Special Forces



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Utkin, when he first recruited and organized veterans of the Russian military to fight as contractors, sought out men with backgrounds similar to his own—former members of the Russian special forces. Spetsnaz, a Russian phrase that means "special purpose," has become a synonym for the Russian special forces. Tor Bukkvoll, a senior research fellow at the Norwegian Defense Research Establishment who focuses on European security issues, turns his attention to the history of Russia's special forces in his latest book *Spetsnaz*.

The Soviet military intelligence directorate, commonly known as the GRU, was behind the creation of the first special-purpose unit. Spetsnaz's founding and its original mission were tied to the early history of the Cold War, when the United States first began deploying tactical nuclear weapons to Europe. "It was the need to destroy these nukes early in case of war that triggered the Soviet Union to create special operations forces." (41) According to Bukkvoll, the new units trained to "[insert] personnel deep into the enemy territory [and] find any American 'Little John' free-flight nuclear rocket artillery launchers." They were to find the launchers within 36 hours and, once found, destroy them within 90 minutes. By the 1980s, this directive to seek and destroy covered the US Pershing medium-range missiles in Europe as well. (34)

The first generation of spetsnaz came from the Red Army Airborne troops. Spetsnaz recruiters would show up at airborne units and demand the transfer of its best soldiers to a new outfit. An incredulous airborne commander would call his headquarters, ready to throw the haughty recruiter out of the office, only to find himself reluctantly transferring his best soldiers to this new unit. As Bukkvoll notes, "giving up their top performers to some low-ranking officers without a word as to what they would be used for was a serious insult." (33) Unlike special forces in the West, volunteering was not the first step into this select community in the Red Army. Many spetsnaz soldiers were conscripts who were selected and transferred based on their skills, whether they liked it or not. The existence of the unit was shrouded in secrecy. While the United States suspected the Red Army was building a special warfare forcee, this was not confirmed until the 1960s.

As the US war in Vietnam was heating up, an increasing number of protests in the States roiled the domestic political landscape. "When Yuri Andropov was promoted to chair of the KGB in 1967, his number-one priority was to regenerate a specific capacity for 'special actions of a political nature'." (83) Soon Spetsnaz GRU found itself with a civilian counterpart, Spetsnaz KGB, whose mission was to organize partisans and direct political activities behind enemy lines. Spetsnaz KGB helped train allies

in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, as the Soviets attempted to fan the flames of revolutionary fervor around the world, modeled after North Vietnam and its successful insurgency against South Vietnam.

Spetsnaz GRU trained for war time sabotage in Europe, and Spetsnaz KGB helped train and lead third world revolutionaries, but as a special-mission force "Spetsnaz did not engage in direct combat until [the] invasion of Afghanistan in 1979." (53) The first to enter the war were 520 Muslim Spetsnaz GRU soldiers from central Soviet republics, famously known as the "Muslim battalion" or the "Musbat." (107) GRU authorities specifically made the ethnically based troop deployment decision, assuming Muslim soldiers would better acclimate and blend into Afghanistan. The Musbatys were brought into Afghanistan to assist the pro-Soviet government. Their first mission was to protect President Hafizullah Amin and his palace. However, when Moscow learned that Amin was responsible for the death of long-time Soviet ally Nur Muhammad Taraki, the general secretary of the Democratic Party of Afghanistan, their orders changed from protectors to assassins. (109–11).

Killing Amin was the beginning of the Red Army's long slide into its own quagmire for much of the 1980s. First brought into Afghanistan with an assumption of cultural familiarity, the Musbatys instead became known for their brutality against Afghan civilians. While spetsnaz provided a convenient direct-action arm for the Soviet leadership, it was of little use in a war with no strategic direction. Excessive secrecy and stove-piping within the Red Army further prevented the effective employment of spetsnaz. Complaining about the lack of battlefield intelligence, Red Army commanders had no idea that they had in theater the best strategic reconnaissance soldiers in the Soviet military and did not know how to use them. These commanders saw and treated spetsnaz as highly trained light infantry and assigned them missions they would assign to conventional airborne forces.

The misuse of spetsnaz during war has never been corrected, suggesting that this is a deeper cultural problem within the military high command and the national command authority in Moscow. Besides the famous Alpha Group of the Spetsnaz FSB, charged with the national counterterrorism mission, deploying spetsnaz as light infantry has been a generational complaint since Afghanistan. This complaint has surfaced again and again in all of Russia's wars after the collapse of the Soviet Union—Chechnya, Georgia, and now Ukraine. When going to war with conscripts who are poorly treated and trained, it is no surprise that commanders in the field would repeatedly rely on a select group of professional soldiers, whether they are better employed as strategic assets or not.

Bukkvoll's latest work is not a comprehensive military history of spetsnaz nor does it claim to be. The author in the preface acknowledges the methodological shortcomings of the book, as it is based mostly on published memoirs and interviews with former members. Readers understand Bukkvoll's research limitations, however. Historians rely on access to archives for documentary research based on original sources. Such state archives probably do exist but, needless to say, under the current Russian government they would be off limits to a defense researcher from a NATO country. This is a research challenge that Lechner faced as well. Wagner PMC and its founders are politically sensitive topics in Russia. Lechner traveled the world, visiting the places where Wagner operated, in Mali, Syria, and Ukraine, and based his book mostly on interviews with former members.

Despite any methodological shortcomings, Lechner and Bukkvoll provide a wonderful service to the reading public interested in Russian military history. The two books together provide a valuable snapshot of the Soviet and Russian special forces and military contractors. When read together, the books offer a deeper understanding of how these communities evolved and grew from one another and what a former spetsnaz operator like Dimitry Utkin, who fought in every Russian conflict since the end of the Cold War, witnessed as a soldier and then as a private military contractor. ■