

The data from this report come from the March 22, 2023, version of GRID — the GTTAC Record of Incidents Database.

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RESEARCH BRIEF
The Global Terrorism and Trends Analysis Center



Russian mercenaries provide security for convoy for Central African Republic President Touadéra, February 16, 2022. Credit: Clément Di Roma/VOA , [Photo](#), Public domain, courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

THE COUNTERTERRORISM

Brief

July 5, 2023



Focus on Wagner Group

Eoin Healy and Natalie Anastasio

The Wagner Group, a Russian-based mercenary group, has until recently played a supporting role in Russia's militant efforts in the Russo-Ukrainian War.¹ However, a recent attempted rebellion by the Wagner Group against the Russian government in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian War compels a closer look at this group and its role in not only this conflict but in others as well.²

On June 24, 2023, the Wagner Group took control of Rostov-on-Don, a city close to the Russian border with Ukraine, assuming control over the military installations there.³ The group then traveled north toward Moscow, until it was ordered to stand down.³ However, during its travels the group shot down six invaluable Russian aircrafts, resulting in several deaths.⁴

The leader of this mercenary group, Yevgeniy Prigozhin, described the efforts as an “attempted coup d'état” against the Russian state in response to his claims that the Russian military shelled his troops stationed in Ukraine. However, to avoid further bloodshed, he decided to end the revolt.⁵ He later referred to the events as a protest, to illuminate Russian military failures rather than to threaten the government.⁶

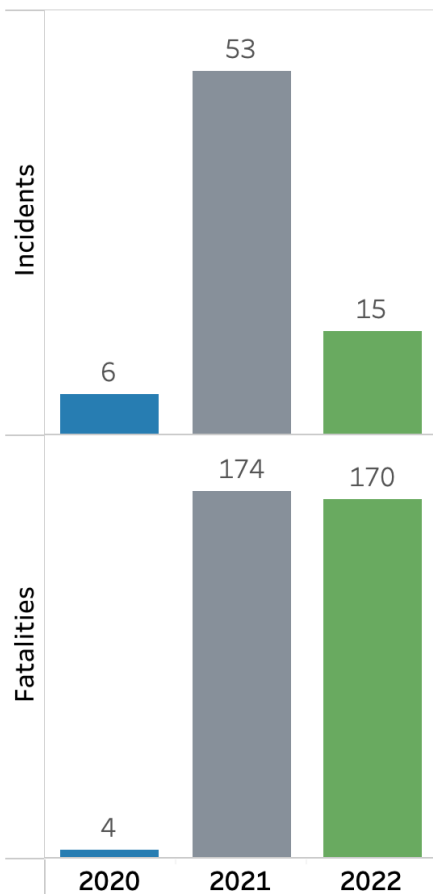
Ukrainian officials suggest that Prigozhin gave up too quickly, and that if the rebellion had lasted even slightly longer it would have been a significant blow to Russian troop morale.⁷

The group appears to have been entirely funded by the Russian government for the

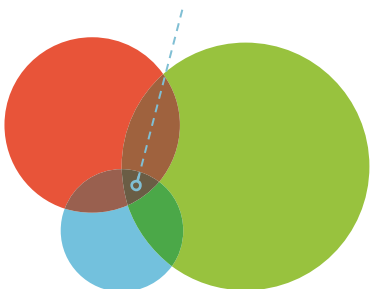


Focus on Wagner Group (continued)

Incidents by year



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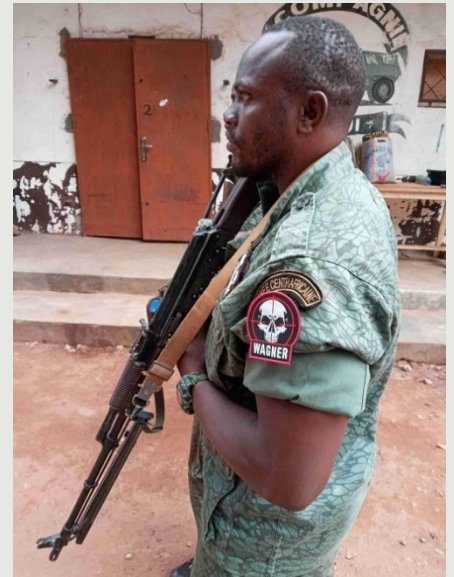
past year, which made their actions even more confusing.² More troubling for Russia, the group's march seemed to be supported by civilians who cheered them on, with Putin even citing the decision to not act violently having prevented a civil war.²

Adding to the complexity of this scenario, Russian President Putin appears not to be pursuing criminal charges against the mercenary group, and instead is requiring it to return all weaponry.⁸ There are talks that Putin made some type of deal with Prigozhin, persuading him to stand down.⁷

The Wagner Group's militant activities have not been limited to Eastern Europe. Since its inception, the group has furthered Russian interests across 30 countries, including Syria and Libya.

Further, its mercenaries often have targeted civilians in the group's international conquests, resulting in a plethora of human rights atrocities⁹

While the group has been less active in these types of attacks in 2022 (likely because of the war with Ukraine), 2021 saw much more



A soldier from the Central African Armed Forces sports a Wagner Group patch, November, 22, 2021. Credit: Corbeau News Centrafrique, [Photo](#), CC BY-SA 4.0 Int.

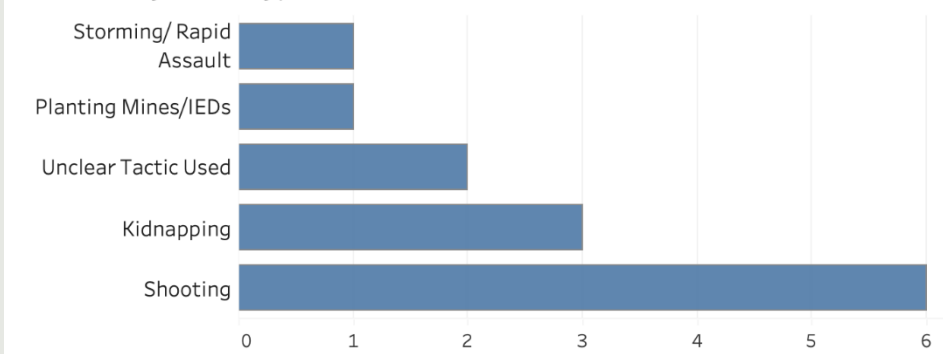
GTTAC Defining Terrorism

An incident is deemed a terrorist act if it conforms with Title 22, Section 2656f, of the U.S. Code. It is therefore defined as a violent act carried out by nonstate actors that meets the following inclusion criteria:

- The violent act aims to attain a political, economic, religious, or social goal.
- The violent act includes evidence of an intention to coerce, intimidate, or convey some other message to an audience (or audiences) larger than the immediate victims.
- The violent act occurred outside the precepts of international humanitarian law, as far as it targeted non-combatants.

The Global Terrorism Trends and Analysis Center includes only those incidents for which all three criteria were met. In some cases, where terrorists initiate an action that targets military forces rather than non-combatants, this would be considered an incident.

Incidents by tactic type in 2022



Understanding the Data

GRID records only those Wagner incidents that meet its criteria for inclusion. See the inclusion criteria on Page 2. Additionally, Wagner operates in areas of weak governance and with poor media coverage, which are challenging conditions to open-source data collection.

violent activity from the group. From 2021 to 2022, there was a 72% decrease in the number of attacks the group carried out. However, fatalities decreased by only 2% from 2021, suggesting the group became more lethal in 2022.

In 2022 the Wagner Group mostly used shootings in its attacks (40%), but also conducted kidnappings (20%).

Additionally, 46% of the group's attacks in 2022 targeted the general population, while only a few targeted military, students, or other victim types.

The Wagner Group originated in 2014 when Prigozhin, an ex-convict turned chef for President Putin, founded the militia to help the Russian military with its annexation of Crimea.⁵

The group, according to its leader, has around 20,000 members, with fresh troops being recruited from Russian prisons to help in the recent war efforts against Ukraine.¹ Of these mercenaries, 5,000 are said to be stationed in Africa,

made up of not only Russians but also of Libyans and Syrians.⁹ While made up of not only Russians but also of Libyan and Syrians.⁹

The Russian government has used the group as a covert way to operate in different areas across the globe.⁸ Russian use of mercenaries separates the state from direct attribution for strategic attacks carried out by the Wagner Group.¹⁰ In one instance, the group attempted to fight against the Islamic State in Mozambique.¹⁰



Russian mercenaries deployed in the Central African Republic, October 2022. Credit: Corbeau News Centrafrique, [Photo](#), CC BY-SA 4.0.



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A SNEAK PEAK AHEAD

Focus on Wagner Group (continued)

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Dr. Sophia Moskalenko is a Programme Management Specialist at the United Nations' Office of Counter-Terrorism, Behavioral Insights Hub. After receiving her Ph.D. in social and clinical psychology from the University of Pennsylvania, she focused her research on radicalization, self-sacrifice, martyrdom, and disinformation. As a research fellow at the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (NC-START) Dr. Moskalenko has worked on projects commissioned by the Department of Defense, Department of Energy, Department of Homeland Security, and Department of State. She serves as a consultant to the European Commission, the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation and Georgia State University's Cyber Security Unit. Dr. Moskalenko is a certified Mindfulness instructor, and is the designer of the Mindfulness-Based Initiative for Building Resilience Against Radicalization.

The Wagner Group has been particularly active in Africa, allegedly smuggling exploited minerals from countries such as the Central African Republic.⁸ Capitalization on gold mining by the group has been said to have reached \$250 million in the past four years.⁹

The recent rebellion by the group in Russia calls into question the group's future. However, it does not appear that the Wagner Group is going to be disbanded, with government officials stating that its activities in Mali and the Central African Republic will continue.⁹

While the group's resource exploitation is significant, the mercenaries also have been accused of committing countless human rights violations, including murders and rapes, across Africa.⁸

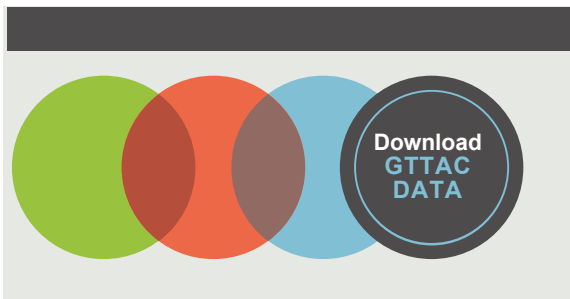
If the Wagner Group were to cease existence in Africa, the influence of Russia worldwide, as well as the stability of certain African governments, will come into question.¹¹

For these reasons, the United States categorizes the Wagner Group as a transnational criminal organization.¹⁰ In Libya, for example, the group was accused of intentionally planting land-mines in civilian areas.¹⁰

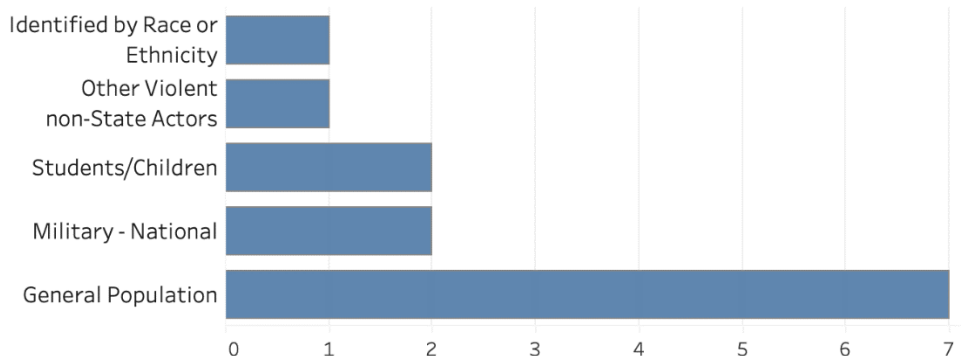


Yevgeny Prigozhin (cropped from Prime Minister Vladimir Putin tours the new factory Concord, which supplies pre-prepared meals to schools), 20 September 2010. Credit: Government of the Russian Federation, CC BY 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

Terrorism Datasets 2018 – 2023 Available for Download



Incidents by victim type in 2022



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