

The Wagner Group PMC: Efficiency and Desperation

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The massive increase in the Wagner Group's numbers recently came from their recruitment of some 40,000 prisoners from Russian jails.² That increase in manning, made the Private Military Group (PMG) an appetizing supplement for Russian leadership who are struggling to make gains in their war of annexation in Ukraine. This paper will argue that the extensive Russian use of the Wagner Group in Ukraine shows both a Russian desire to increase efficiency and a sense of desperation in the war in Ukraine; it also shows a new willingness to subvert international norms on army behavior. The combination of this desire to increase efficiency, mounting desperation, and a refusal to stop or acknowledge war crimes, marks a new low in the war in Ukraine.

By allowing the Wagner PMG to recruit Russian prisoners to increase the numbers of personnel available to fight, Russian leadership clearly demonstrated a feeling of desperation about the vector of their war in Ukraine. It's unclear exactly when Putin pardoned prisoners and Wagner was allowed to recruit them to fight in Ukraine, however, the fact that the recruitment of prisoners happened within months of the partial mobilization of 300,000 new military forces, shows a severe shortage of qualified personnel. The mobilization and Wagner Group recruitment, essentially allowed Russia to increase the size of the army by nearly 350,000 personnel at a time when it had already experienced an estimated 80,000 casualties.³ The UK ministry of defense currently estimates Russian casualties have jumped to roughly 200,000 with 40,000-60,000 personnel killed.⁴ Losses of that scale make it very difficult for a relatively small army like Russia's to maintain combat effectiveness.

Because of the extensive losses of combat troops, Russian leadership has been forced to look for ways to shore-up their degraded Army to immediately continue fighting, and to sustain a long term offensive operation. The limited mobilization of 300,000, and the possibility of

another 500,000 called to fight this spring, should allow for continued operations in the long-term. The short-term Russian plan to supplement forces appears to have been to use prisoners aligned with the Wagner group. That short term plan has resulted in devastating losses for the Wagner Group with an estimated 30,000 personnel killed.⁵ In spite of the heavy losses, and the deployment of the PMG showing desperation of Russian leaders, Wagner Group was also moved to Ukraine to increase efficiency and force Ukraine to spend its limited resources fighting undesirable Russian people.

Wagner Group's inclusion in the conflict generally, and the use of prisoners specifically, shows the Russian leadership's desire to increase efficiency. Despite being relatively untrained, and poorly equipped, the Russian prisoners in the Wagner Group present the same threat to Ukrainian defenders as do regular Russian military. Ukraine must expend effort, ammunition, and forces, all of which are in low supply, to prevent the PMG forces from taking territory. Additionally, since the Wagner Group has been credibly accused of committing war crimes against civilians in Ukraine and other countries, Zelensky is unable to trade land for time if that trade would leave civilians in the path of the Wagner Group.⁶ He is unwilling to allow his people to suffer more crimes against humanity at the hands of literal Russian criminals.

Zelensky has no choice but to commit forces to stop the Wagner Group's fighters. Russian leadership knows this, and by supplementing the army forces already in Ukraine with Wagner Group fighters, they are able to engage and fix Ukrainian forces in place while the recently mobilized Russian forces are trained and moved to the front. The Russian's wouldn't have resorted to using prisoners if there was no element of desperation, however, the move is also shrewd and shows a Russian willingness to trade undesirable members of their society to

allow more training time for their regular army while simultaneously attriting Ukrainian resources.

¹ *Opinions, conclusions, and recommendations expressed or implied within are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Air University, the United States Air Force, the Department of Defense, or any other US government agency."*

² Lovett, Ian. "Russia's Wagner Group Says it no Longer Recruits Prisoners to Fight in Ukraine." <https://www.wsj.com/articles/russias-wagner-group-says-it-no-longer-recruits-prisoners-to-fight-in-ukraine-11675945752>

³ Cancian, Mark. "What does Russia's 'Partial Mobilization' Mean?" Accessed 20 Feb, 2023. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/what-does-russias-partial-mobilization-mean>

⁴ UK Ministry of Defense. "Latest Defence Intelligence Update on the Situation in Ukraine - 17 February 2023." Accessed 20 Feb, 2023. <https://twitter.com/DefenceHQ/status/1626472945089486848>

⁵ "Russia's Wagner Fighters Suffer 30,000 Casualties in Ukraine: US." Accessed 20 Feb, 2023. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/2/18/russias-wagner-forces-suffered-30000-casualties-in-ukraine-us>

⁶ Prothero, Mitchell. "Wagner Ends Convict Recruitment, Days After Fighters Filmed Beating Officer with Shovel." Accessed 20 Feb, 2023. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/y3pynk/wagner-russia-ukraine-prisons>