

# The PMC's Evolution: From the War in Angola to the Wagner Group

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**How and when did private military companies (PMCs) emerge? What have they been they doing, and where? What do private military companies and Wagner have in common? Journalists from the “Barmaleys/Partisans” project delve into the history of the question**

The world's first private military company, WatchGuard International, was founded by a Scottish officer in the British army, Colonel David Stirling, the same man who, during World War II, created the commando unit that became known as the SAS (Special Air Service). In the 1960s, Stirling came up with the idea of creating an officially registered and state-controlled organization of such soldiers of fortune.

In 1965, Stirling registered WatchGuard International Ltd with another SAS veteran, John Woodhouse. WatchGuard was headquartered in London and legally registered as an offshore company in Jersey. WatchGuard primarily did business on the Arabian Peninsula — in Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and Oman. Specialists from the former SAS advised the governments of these countries on military training and the suppression of insurgent movements; they also assisted in combating them.

It is noteworthy that in 1970-71, WatchGuard was developing a special operation to overthrow Colonel Muammar Gaddafi and restore the “legitimate” power of King Idris in Syria. This would have made an intriguing plot for a spy thriller, but the plans of these “soldiers of fortune” were not fated to be realized: the government demanded that WatchGuard pull out of the operation because the involvement of British subjects in such an adventure would have damaged British relations with Arab countries.

In 1972, Stirling stopped playing an active role in WatchGuard International. During the second half of the decade, he worked on creating a secret organization designed to undermine the trade union movement.

Meanwhile, more and more new PMCs appeared around the world. In 1974, the U.S. government signed a contract with Vinnell Corporation for over \$500 million. The employees of this PMC were to be involved in training the National Guard of Saudi Arabia and in protecting its oil fields.

Not only Stirling, but other former fighters of the SAS were engaged in the creation of PMCs, which supplied bodyguards, assassins, and military trainers around the world. Some of these other organizations openly advertised their services, while others preferred to register as consulting or insurance firms. This is how, for example, Control Risks Group was founded in 1975. It originally consisted of only three SAS officers and was engaged in searching for kidnapped individuals. Over time, this MPC grew into an international military consulting enterprise.

A notable episode in the history of PMCs concerns the activities of the British Security Advisory Services. This company, founded by arms dealer Leslie Aspin, former paratrooper Frank Perrin, and retired Marine John Banks, recruited “soldiers of fortune” en masse to participate in the civil war in

Angola. In November 1975, after Angola gained independence from Portugal, a significant episode in the Cold War took place: an armed conflict between the pro-Soviet MPLA (People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola) — a labor party that seized power in the country in defiance of the coalition government agreements, the pro-American FNLA (The National Front for the Liberation of Angola), and UNITA (The National Union for the Total Independence of Angola).

Norman Hall, aid of Holden Roberto, the leader of the National Front for the Liberation of Angola, came to the UK and transferred \$25,000 to the Special Air Service (SAS) for their help in the recruitment of mercenaries. Later on, another one of Roberto's aids, Terence Haig, transferred another \$85,000 to SAS.

Banks recruited soldiers for the frontline in London pubs, as if it was still the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The mercenaries would gather at Dirty Dick's pub and, after spending the night at St. George-in-the-East, would fly, with transfers, to Zaire, which neighbors Angola. SAS signed a six-month contract with the mercenaries and paid their travel expenses. According to Banks, the men were offered \$300 a week and a \$10,000 bonus for each Russian taken prisoner. A total of 90 to 200 soldiers, according to various estimates, went to Angola. Some of them were as young as 17 and had neither army experience nor proper ammunition. Ben Hills, a reporter for an Australian newspaper *The Age*, estimates that 59 SAS mercenaries were killed in Angola.

In June 1976, a show trial of thirteen mercenaries who had fought against the MPLA was held in Luanda, the capital of Angola. As a result, four of them (three British citizens and one American) were sentenced to death and nine others to terms of imprisonment ranging from 16 to 30 years (the U.S. was able to exchange its nationals as early as 1982, and the British Foreign Office exchanged its nationals in 1984).

Reacting to the trial in Luanda, the British Parliament declared that the SAS activities were in violation of the 1870 law forbidding the recruitment of mercenaries for war. However, no sanctions were applied to those involved.

In 1981, with the financial support of British banks, Defense Systems Limited was founded. Under the contracts of the World Bank, the UN, and non-governmental organizations, it worked in Africa protecting fuel and energy infrastructure and training personnel. Another PMC, the Golan Group, emerged in Israel in the early 1980s. It was created by retired Special Forces officers who supplied military instructors to Latin American countries. Another company, Beni Tal, conducted operations against the PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization).

The real heyday of PMCs came with the end of the Cold War. The recruitment base for them now consisted of millions of military experts who were out of work as a result of the military drawdown among members of NATO and the Warsaw Pact. Huge quantities of cheap weapons, primarily Soviet-made, were thrown into the market. There was also no shortage of customers, because neither the United States nor the states that emerged from the collapse of the Soviet Union had now much reason to intervene in the endless squabbles on the African continent. As a result, African rulers had to look elsewhere for power support.

Already during the 1990-91 Gulf War, civilian contractors constituted 2% of the U.S. military contingent, although most of them worked not for PMCs, but for conventional private firms. As Ivan Kononov and Oleg Valetsky (who himself worked for PMCs) write in their book, *The Evolution of Private Military Companies*, "the entire logistics support of the Saudi army was provided by private contractors from the United States. On the front lines, instructors from the private military company Vinnell accompanied the units of the Saudi National Guard in fighting with the Iraqi troops near Ra's al-Hafji. DynCorp specialists serviced most of the helicopter units on the front lines."

In 1989, Eeben Barlow and Michael Mullen, who previously headed the Western European branch of the Civil Cooperation Bureau (CCB), a South African intelligence agency involved in intelligence and assassinations of political opponents, founded another PMC, Executive Outcomes (EO). When the apartheid system began to collapse in the early 1990s and the resistance leader Nelson Mandela demanded that the South African President Frederik Willem de Klerk disband the special forces involved in political assassinations, many former members of these special forces lost their jobs and found new vacancies at this new PMC.

The government of Angola, where civil war broke out in the fall of 1992 after UNITA refused to recognize the results of the elections, signed two contracts with Executive Outcomes for \$40 million each. As a result of a series of operations by Executive Outcomes, UNITA suffered significant damages and was forced to negotiate. In November 1994, a peace treaty was signed between EO and the Angolan government, which put a temporary end to the bloodshed (a few years later it resumed with full force).

In January 1995, Executive Outcomes was hired as a contractor by the government of Sierra Leone, in order to fight rebels from the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), famous for using more than 10,000 child soldiers, mostly aged 7 to 12. By then, the rebels had already entered the capital, Freetown, and had seized control of important titanium and bauxite deposits. Under the terms of the agreement, the government of Sierra Leone pledged to pay Executive Outcomes \$1.8 million per month (mainly provided by the International Monetary Fund). The armed forces of Executive Outcomes consisted of 500 military advisers and 3,000 well-trained and equipped soldiers, supported by helicopters and armored vehicles purchased by PMCs in Africa and Eastern Europe.

The unit, made up of the former members of the odious 32<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the South African Army, which had been disbanded earlier at the request of the African National Congress on the eve of the parliamentary elections, was described by *Harper's Magazine* as a bunch of spies and assassins, who had served in South African counterinsurgency for 15 to 20 years.

This PMC has been extremely effective on the battlefield. In just ten days of fighting, it was able to push RUF forces sixty miles inland. Seven months later, with the support of the Sierra Leonean army, Executive Outcomes managed to remove RUF from the diamond mining area, and then, during the second offensive, destroyed their main base, forcing the rebels to sign the Abidjan Peace Agreement on November 30, 1996.

After the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the U.S. government used the services of several PMCs in order to train local police and military forces and control the movement of goods and intelligence activities. Private security guards were responsible for the security of foreign targets in Afghanistan, as their employees did not trust the local police. This caused great resentment among the local authorities, who accused the PMCs of criminal behavior.

Before the world heard about the Wagner Group, Blackwater was the most well-known PMC. In September 2005, the U.S. government enlisted the help of Blackwater to eliminate the effects of Hurricane Katrina. About 200 of its employees were flown into the disaster area, an operation that cost the U.S. government \$240,000 per day.

This PMCs "finest hour," however, was the war in Iraq. In December 2006, the U.S. Department of Defense employed at least 100,000 contract workers, 10 times more than the number of civilians hired during the Gulf War. The scope of activities carried out by private companies ranged from catering services to armed defense of U.S. Army bases, mine clearance and the destruction of unexploded munitions. Blackwater received authorization to have 1,020 employees in Iraq. Among other responsibilities, it was tasked with protecting the U.S. Embassy.

[According to](#) Andy Bearpark, director-general of the British Association of Private Security Companies (BAPSC), “In Iraq in 2003 and 2004 money was basically free. That meant [private security] contracts were being let for ridiculous amounts of money — millions and millions of dollars of contracts being pumped into the industry.” Other British companies, Aegis Defense Services and ArmorGroup among them, were getting hundreds of millions of pounds just for the presence of their fighters in Iraq. These companies later subcontracted the security that was previously handled by regular U.S. military personnel. Significantly, PMCs in Iraq were not subject to the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ). Before leaving the country, Lewis Paul Bremer III, the head of the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq between 2003 and 2004, signed an order that granted immunity from prosecution under Iraqi law to all Americans who worked for the occupation government.

As was to be expected, the work of the PMCs was not without [bloody excesses](#). Thus, on March 31, 2004, Iraqi fighters in Fallujah, Iraq, ambushed a convoy of Blackwater vehicles, which was accompanying a delivery of food from the ESS. One of the vehicles crashed into a house, and the others drove through without stopping because those were the terms of the contract. The gunmen dragged the bodies of the Blackwater guards out of the car, doused them with fuel and set them on fire. They then dragged the burnt bodies down the street and hanged them on the bridge over the Euphrates River. All this was filmed on video. The televised images shocked the American public, after which the military launched a cleansing operation in Fallujah.

In September 2007, 17 Iraqi civilians were killed and 20 others injured as a result of indiscriminate firing by Blackwater employees at the Nisour Square massacre in Baghdad. The Blackwater mercenaries saw a suspicious car driving on the wrong side of the road, which did not stop after warning shots had been fired. The Blackwater men opened fire, thinking they were in an ambush. When police responded by firing shots at the Blackwater convoy, the mercenaries thought the Iraqi police were working with the insurgents. One of the mercenaries, however, continued firing even when ordered to stop, ceasing only when his own comrade pointed a gun at him.

An investigation revealed that the mercenaries killed 17 Iraqis, 14 of them for no apparent reason. The day after the shooting, Blackwater’s license to operate in Iraq was revoked. In December 2008, company employees were charged with murder, manslaughter, and exceeding the standards of self-defense. The charges were dropped a year later, due to improper handling of the case. The case was reopened in 2011. Eventually, one of the participants in the incident, Nicholas Slatten, was found guilty of premeditated murder and sentenced to life in prison in April 2015. Three other mercenaries were sentenced to 30 years in prison.

In the last decade, PMCs have been increasingly used in Africa. For example, the United States Africa Command (USAFRICOM) uses 21 American PMCs in North Africa and the Sahara alone. These companies can carry out UN peacekeeping missions, train local combatants, provide logistics, and carry out demining activities and other important tasks. China is also keeping pace with the U.S., using mercenaries, for example, in Sudan on oil fields owned by Chinese companies.

In Africa, the notorious PMC Wagner is particularly active. In 2021, the Government of Mali turned to these Russian soldiers of fortune, offering them, according to some media reports, about \$ 11 million per month for the protection of local officials and training of the Malian military. According to the [All Eyes On Wagner project](#), Wagner mercenaries in Mali participated in all sorts of atrocities, including robbing and killing civilians. Thus, in September 2022, the group took part in a military coup in Burkina Faso that brought to power “Cobra” commander Burkinabé Ibrahim Traoré (whom we covered in our review of recent military coups in Africa).

An investigation by Russian journalists Orkhan Jemal, Kirill Radchenko and Alexander Rastorguev into the PMC Wagner’s activities in the Central African Republic led to their murder, which has yet

to be solved. In May 2022, Human Rights Watch accused the PMC Wagner of killing and torturing civilians in CAR.

It is noteworthy that, according to a journalistic investigation by *The Bell*, the idea of creating the Wagner Group occurred to high-ranking officers of the Russian Defense Ministry in 2010 after a presentation by Eben Barlow, the creator of Executive Outcomes.

The example of the Wagner Group demonstrates how governments can use PMCs in order to carry out their policies without resorting to the help of the regular army and without fear of getting their hands dirty with blood. PMCs are often more professional and trained than conventional armed forces, and much more mobile. They can be used for the most “dirty” operations, without regard for public opinion, for example, to organize an uprising in a country, or, conversely, violent suppression of an insurgency. Losses among the ranks of PMCs do not cause as much public outrage as the deaths of soldiers in the regular army.

PMCs are interested in keeping the wars around the world going, because these conflicts provide them with an endless source of income. According to [Yury Veselovs article](#), “since one of the main objectives of wars is capturing natural resources, it is in the interest of private military companies to follow the orders of transnational corporations from rich companies that are striving to get access to these resources. The annual revenue of some PMCs is comparable with the GDP of some developing countries.” There can be no doubt that PMCs will continue to exist as long as wars — and capitalism — continue to exist.

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