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Dec 14, 2023 · 19 tweets · [P_Kallioniemi/status/1735248174296502628](#)

In today's #vatniksoup, I'll talk about how the Kremlin uses the country's large prison population to feed its war machine in Ukraine. Russia utilizes these penal military units often to exhaust Ukrainian forces of ammunition & for exposing the location of Ukrainian troops.

1/17



Penal military units are by no means a new thing. During the Han–Dayuan War, Emperor Wu of Han promised amnesty and rewards to prisoners who'd fight for him. This 60 000-strong army called the "bad boys" attacked the Greco-Bactrian kingdom of Dayuan in 102 BC.

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Nazis also used these units extensively during World War 2. These "Strafbataillon" often consisted of criminals, political prisoners and deserters, and they were often ordered to undertake high risk missions on the front line.

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The most famous penal military units was the 36th Waffen Grenadier Division of the SS led by Oskar Dirlewanger, often described as the "most evil man" in the SS. The unit participated in the mass murder of civilians and other atrocities, and was known for its brutality.

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"We blew up the doors, I think of a school. Children were standing in the hall and on the stairs. Lots of children. All with their small hands up. We looked at them for a few moments until Dirlwanger ran in. He ordered to kill them all. They shot them and then they were walking over their bodies and breaking their little heads with butt ends. Blood streamed down the stairs. There is a memorial plaque in that place stating that 350 children were killed. I think there were many more, maybe 500."

"Or that Polish woman" (Schenk doesn't remember which action it was). "Every time, when we stormed the cellars and women were inside the Dirlwanger soldiers raped them. Many times a group raped the same woman, quickly, still holding weapons in their hands. Then after one of the fights, I was standing shaking by the wall and couldn't calm my nerves. Dirlwanger soldiers burst in. One of them took a woman. She was pretty. She wasn't screaming. Then he was raping her, pushing her head strongly against the table, holding a bayonet in the other hand. First he cut open her blouse. Then one cut from stomach to throat. Blood gushed. Do you know, how fast blood congeals in August?"



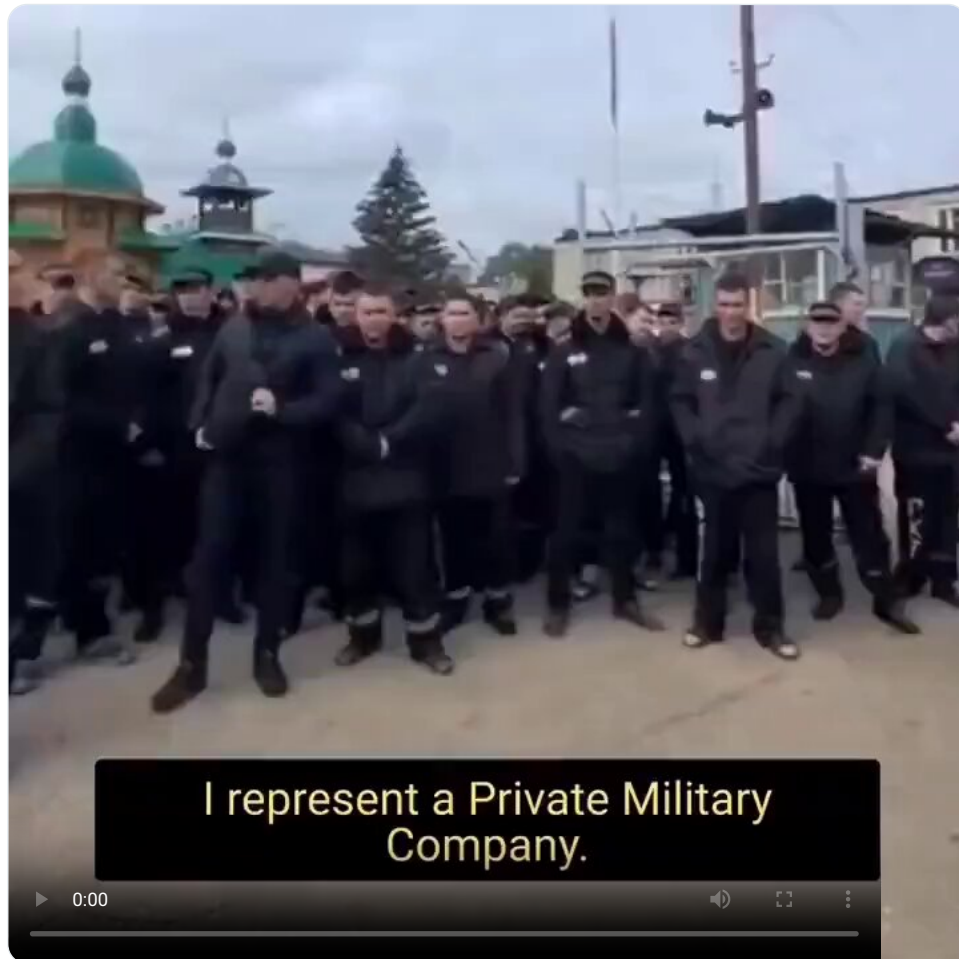
This Nazi strategy was also utilized by the PMC Wagner founder, Yevgeny Prigozhin and his henchman Dmitry Utkin. Prigozhin had spent 9 years behind bars and understood the Russian prison culture well. Probably due to this, the Kremlin gave him free hands in recruiting...



...prisoners to fight in Ukraine. The deal went as follows: fight for 6 months with PMC Wagner & you'll be free. And many did, especially those who had long sentences or were placed in the most harsh & hostile prisons, often becoming victims of torture and/or sexual

violence.

6/17



In early 2023, an official Russian TV channel showed an interview of Mikhail Popok, a Russian serial killer, rapist and a necrophile who wants to join the Russian war effort in Ukraine.

It's unknown if Popok ever joined the PMC and whether he's still alive.

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Many of these convicts have been turned into heroes after their death. In Jan, 2023, Wagner organized a "hero's funeral" for a man who beat his mother to death in a drunken frenzy. They also put up a plaque for a convicted murderer, in a grade school in Saratov.

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As Russia has an extremely high conviction rate, 99,6%, long prison terms and inhumane prison conditions, there's a very strong incentive to risk death in order to obtain freedom. In addition, PMC's like Wagner promise the recruits a good monthly salary even if they die.

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THE  TIMES Today's sections ▾ Past six days Explore ▾ Times Radio Log in

Russian conviction rate is higher than under Stalin

Marc Bennetts

Monday August 14 2017, 12.01 am BST, The Times



Alexei Navalny, the anti-Putin activist, lamented the low acquittal rates
KIRILL KUDRYAVTSEV/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

“Not guilty” are words seldom heard from Russian judges, according to statistics published by the supreme court showing that less than 1 per cent of criminal cases end in acquittal.

Nikolai, a construction worker who was convicted along with his wife for selling drugs, said he joined Wagner out of patriotism. Money also helped. Even if he died, he said, the compensation Wagner promised his family — about \$50,000 — would solve their housing problems. “This is wonderful, I thought.”

Even death would have meaning, if he were killed in battle. “I didn’t want to be such a bad person in the eyes of the children in our village,” he said. “I would be remembered not as a convict, but as a man who died in a war.”

According to Wagner, the total number of prisoners hired by them from the Russia's prison system is around 50 000, and according to same source 1/5 of them have died. This number is probably much higher, as the prisoners are often sent to high risk suicide missions.

10/17

Military operation in Ukraine ,May 24, 12:36 | Share ↗

Yevgeny Prigozhin named the losses of the Wagner PMC in Artemovsk

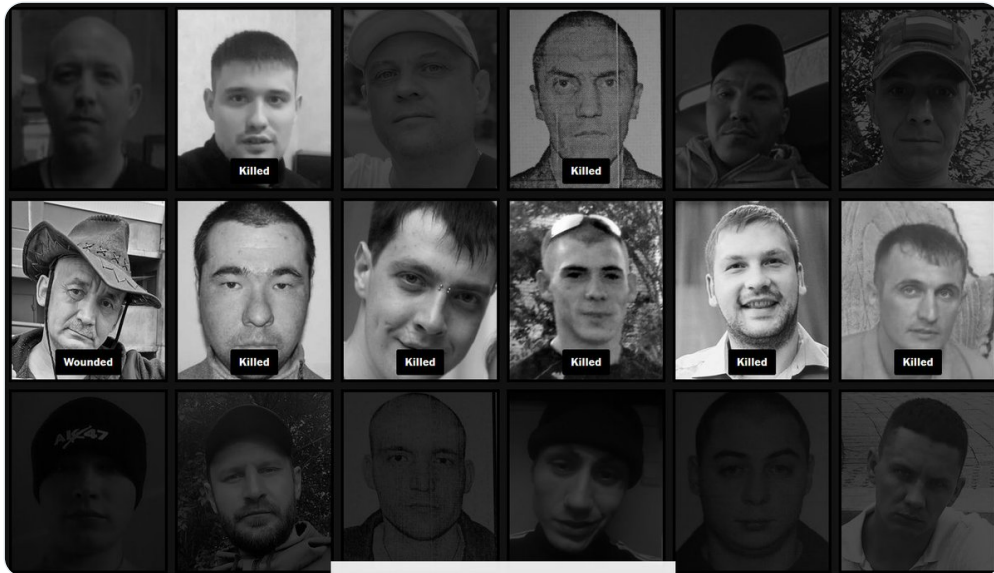
Plot Military operation in Ukraine >

According to Prigozhin, the PMC recruited 50 thousand prisoners, of whom 20% died. The same losses occurred among contract soldiers. The Ukrainian Armed Forces killed 50 thousand military personnel, he said



Mykhailo Podolyak, an adviser to Ukraine's president, Volodymyr Zelenskiy, recently claimed Wagner had recruited more than 38,000 prisoners in recent months, and said 30,000 had been killed, wounded, captured or were missing. He accused Wagner of taking part in a Russian "genocide" in Ukraine.

Many of the new recruits have been tossed into action as cannon fodder at the frontline, as Prigozhin tries hard to prove that his fighters are more capable of making gains than the regular Russian army.



In Jan 2023, a whopping 106 prisoners had been amnestied. Those who have been released, have often committed more serious crimes like murder and rape. Naturally, these criminals are at high risk of committing crimes and atrocities while fighting in Ukraine, too.

11/17



The few recruits that come back from Ukraine, quickly go back to life of crime, alcoholism and drug use. Vera Pekhteleva's murderer and former boyfriend, Vladislav Kanius, spent less than a year behind before he was recruited to fight in Ukraine.

12/17

Russian convicts released to fight with Wagner accused of new crimes

🕒 10 August



War in Ukraine



By Arsenii Sokolov, Tim Whewell & Nina Nazarova

BBC World Service

A prisoner believed to have been released early to fight with Wagner mercenaries in Ukraine has been accused of committing a double murder in Russia after returning home from the war.



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The Violent Homecoming of Russian Convicts Freed to Fight in Ukraine

Wave of new, brutal crimes comes as former prisoners finish military contracts and go home; 'thousands of criminals are walking our streets'

A photo released by Russia's Investigative Committee showing one of the houses in Derevyannoye that Igor Sofonov and his alleged accomplice are accused of having burned down following the murder of six residents in the village on August 1. RUSSIAN INVESTIGATIVE COMMITTEE/TASS/ZUMA PRESS

By [Matthew Luxmoore](#) [Follow](#)

Dec. 5, 2023 12:01 am ET

Oksana Pekhteleva's 23-year-old daughter Vera was stabbed more than 100 times, then strangled with an electric cable in an attack so violent it made headlines across Russia.

In July 2022 Vera's former boyfriend, Vladislav Kanius, was sentenced to 17 years in a penal colony for her murder. Less than a year later, it didn't occur to Oksana that he could be anywhere else. But she was wrong.

Photos of him started to appear on social media in May. He was holding a gun and wearing military uniform. To start with Oksana presumed they were fake.

But a month later she received official confirmation that Kanius had been transferred to a prison in Rostov in southern Russia, a place widely believed to be a staging point for Russian prisoners who volunteered to fight in Ukraine.



FAMILY HANDOUT

Vera Pekhteleva was stabbed 100 times and strangled to death - her murderer was released after 10 months

Even before his death, Prigozhin was no longer allowed to recruit soldiers from prisons, as this "privilege" was moved on to the Ministry of Defense. This Russian penal military unit was called Storm-Z and its members were paid a lavish salary by Russian standards.

13/17

Reports from Russia suggest that the defence ministry has taken over from Wagner as a recruiter of inmates for the war against Ukraine.

"It is the same scheme as with the [Wagner] private military company," said RTVI, a Russian news website. "Prisoners sign contracts with the defence ministry, and after completing them they can go home or continue serving."

One member of Storm-Z, a former prisoner interviewed by US-funded website Sever Realii, said defence ministry recruiters promised inmates lavish payments: a salary of 205,000 roubles (about \$2,000 or £1,700) a month, a payment of 3m roubles (\$31,000 or £26,000) per injury and 5m roubles (\$52,000 or £43,000) to be paid to the recruit's relatives if he gets killed.

"It all sounded hunky-dory!" he said. But soon after being deployed to Ukraine the former prisoners realised they were being sent into a "total meat-grinder" without proper armaments or without even being told of the real situation on the front line, he said.

In Jun 2023, Ukrainska Pravda reported that the Kremlin is dismissing the Storm-Z unit due to their "extremely low combat capability". Allegedly, these troops were then transferred to replenish the Volunteer Corps.

14/17

Russia dismisses Storm-Z unit: Convicts turned out to be inefficient – Main Intelligence Directorate of Ukraine's Defence Ministry

TETIANA LOZOVENKO – THURSDAY, 15 JUNE 2023, 12:20



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As before, the main mission for these units is to function as meat walls that are sent to blow up mines, exhaust Ukrainian defenders of ammunition and exposing their location. Regular soldiers are also sent to Storm-Z as a punishment for drinking, attempted desertion, etc.

15/17

It said that the "storm units' job is to break through the most complicated layered parts of Ukrainian defences".

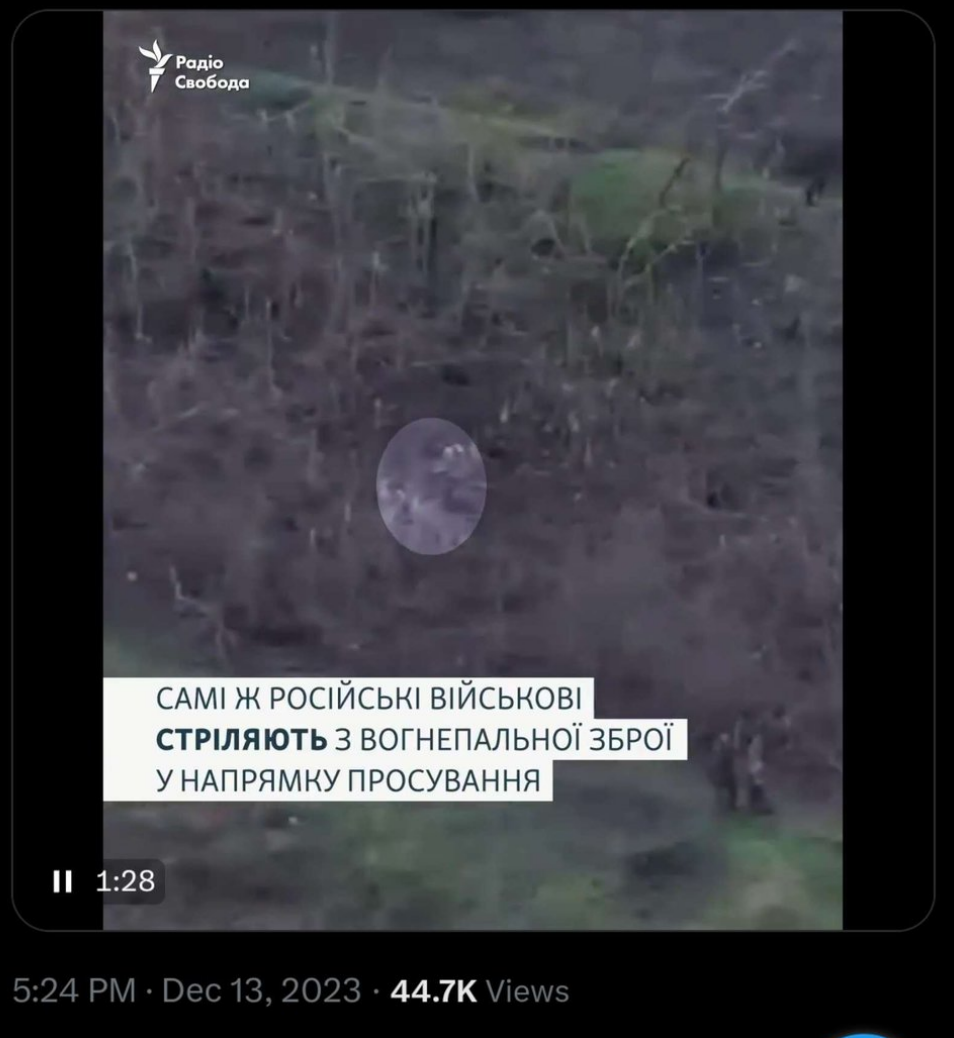
In practice, this appears to mean that they are often readily deployed without much consideration for their chances of survival.

"Storm fighters, they're just meat," one regular soldier who has fought alongside members of Storm-Z, told Reuters. In its investigation, the news agency also said that, in an echo of Stalin's penal military units, servicemen from other army detachments can get sent to Storm-Z as punishment for disobeying orders or drinking alcohol.

One Russian Telegram account believed to be run by a military instructor involved in training Storm-Z units claimed that some of their members had been driven to desperation and attempted desertion after being mistreated by their commanders.

"People can simply go berserk because they're being treated like dispensable meat which deserves no sympathy. And this attitude is in reality not uncommon," the account calling itself the Grey Zone Philologist said.

RFE/RL has obtained drone footage showing a group of Russian army soldiers leading three captives forward while firing behind them.



And the contracts the prisoners are offered have become even worse - the Ministry is offering them 18-month contracts, but in many cases the recruits haven't been given anything to sign. Yet, there are thousands of inmates around Russia ready to enlist to the meatgrinder.

Unlike Wagner, the Defense Ministry soon will have legal grounds – laws allowing for enlisting convicts into contractual service have been swiftly approved by the parliament and signed by Putin last week.

And unlike Wagner, the ministry is offering 18-month contracts, but many recruits haven't been given anything to sign, ending up in a precarious position, Romanova said.

Enthusiasm among inmates to serve hasn't waned, she said, even after thousands were killed on the battlefield.

"Russian roulette is our favorite game," Romanova said, grimly. "National entertainment."

Recently Russia has used a new strategy in order to avoid partial or full mobilization: according to ISW, Russian authorities are revoking the citizenship or visas of immigrants, then offering them a chance to either fight in Ukraine or be exiled back to their homeland.

17/17

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Domestic news

BBC: Russia recruiting migrants near Finnish border to fight in Ukraine

A Somali migrant told the BBC's Russian-language editorial unit that Russia is coercing migrants into becoming war mercenaries.



Finland closed its border with Russia in November after a concerted effort by Russia to send asylum seekers to the border. Image: Jussi Nukari / Lehtikuva

August 28, 2023

By RFE/RL's Russian Service

Migrants Reportedly Being Forced To Sign Contracts With Defense Ministry To Obtain Russian Citizenship



Rights activists says migrants from Central Asian countries **are being pressured** into signing contracts with Russia's Defense Ministry as the Kremlin tries to bolster the pool of recruits to help fight its war against Ukraine.

Central Asian-born migrants with or without Russian citizenship have emerged as critical targets of Russia's military recruitment drive. Authorities from countries such as Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have warned their citizens to avoid participating in military activities abroad as it violates the countries' criminal codes.

For more information, read this fantastic NYT article by @KatjaBody et al.:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/04/world/europe/russia-prison-wagner-ukraine.html>

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