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POLITICS

The Wagnerverse: Pop culture and the heroization of Russian mercenaries

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Russia

Marlene Laruelle and **Kelian Sanz Pascual** on the cinematic universe of the PMC Wagner and how pop culture frames a promote and celebrate a mercenary realm favorable to Russia.

The private military company (PMC) Wagner has once again made international headlines with the arrival of around 1,000 of its employees on battlefields in **Ukraine**. For its supposed owner Evgeny Prigozhin, this is a return to a familiar environment: his companies began their disinformation activities in Ukraine during the Maidan **revolution**. However, the PMC is no longer limited to making war or business: it is also involved in a broader strategy of branding Russia in the eyes of foreign, as well as domestic public opinion. This new activity is not so surprising if we recall that Prigozhin himself specializes in Russia's image abroad and can therefore offer Wagner many of his contacts in the worlds of public relations and show business.



Logo of the Wagner Group. Source: Wiki Commons

While Russian soft power has been probably irreparably destroyed in the West by the invasion of Ukraine,

“Russia still hopes to speak to the Global South public opinion, which still sees Moscow positively, and a small portion of European audiences.”



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Wagner's recent film productions, all dated 2019-2021, have not necessarily been rendered outdated by the war in Ukraine. On the contrary, they continue to speak to European circles that admire survivalism, mercenaries, and non-Asian martial arts, as well as to the Global South. They illustrate how the codes of pop culture have been adopted to enhance and justify the Putin regime's political objectives and, in particular, to heroize mercenary activity, the “subliminal” message being that Russian heroes fight for the good of all humanity and will inevitably be **victorious**.

Hollywood Pop at the Service of Russian Soft Power

Evgeny Prigozhin, the enigmatic owner of Wagner, began his career as a film producer with a film about the Leningrad siege during the Second World War, a classic and respected subject that allowed him to make contacts in the Russian film community.

He then embarked on the production of films celebrating the adventures of a hero despite himself, a Russian-style James Bond, **Maxim Shugaley**. Shugaley, who worked for Prigozhin's notorious Internet Research Agency in Libya, was arrested in 2019 by the authorities in Tripoli with his interpreter and accused of spying for Russia. The Russian authorities, by contrast, presented him as an ordinary researcher working for the **Foundation for the Protection of National Values**. The latter is an opaque structure with limited formal activities; it seems to be mainly used to promote the Russian position in the Middle East and to denounce Western influence in Russia. In reality, it probably provides a smokescreen for more shadowy **operations**.



"Shugaley" film poster, 2020. Source: Wiki Commons

During the campaign for Shugaley's release, Wagner was able to get several American actors, including Charlie Sheen, to record support videos on the Cameo app. He flooded Facebook and Instagram with these messages of **support**. Shugaley was finally released in December 2020.

The first movie, "Shugaley" (2020) was so successful in Russia that two sequels were quickly shot. The third part of the trilogy features a cameo by the real Maxim Shugaley, who has continued, since his release, to work for various structures linked to Prigozhin and is also now the president of the Foundation for the Protection of National Values.

The other films funded by Prigozhin relate more directly to Wagner, as their screenplays focus on "Russian instructors" in various countries. The three films about Wagner's

mercenaries present them as Russians who are dispatched to train local armies in the Central African Republic in *"Tourist"*, in Donbas in *"Brilliant Sun,"* and in Mozambique in *"Granite"*. They find themselves obliged—over the instructions of their higher-ups—take up arms to protect local populations from a global plot hatched by individuals more or less explicitly identified as "Western agents," who join forces with bloodthirsty local fighters with the goal of fomenting chaos.

The only outlier is the movies *"16th,"* devoted to the 2016 U.S. presidential election and features the notorious troll factory. The film ridicules accusations of Russian interference and seeks to discredit Americans while celebrating "talented Russian hackers" with global influence.

All these films reproduce the success formulas of Hollywood movies: the epic adventure of a hero in spite of himself, who finds himself obliged to defend peace and the innocent; violence-ready villains described without nuances; special effects; and bombastic music. As in the tradition of Marvel films, characters introduced in *"Tourist"* reappear in *"Shugaley 3"* as well as *"Granite."* The PMC Wagner films share the same director as the Shugaley trilogy: Sergei Shcheglov, who began working in the Soviet film industry during perestroika and started his own production company, Triiks Media, in 2006.

Some of the films benefit from the participation of Russian pop culture figures, including actors Vladimir Petrov and Kirill Polukhin, as well as the very popular lead singer of the punk rock group Leningrad, Sergei Shnurov, who has recently reinvented himself as a regime's loyalist. Shnurov contributed to the soundtracks of the films *"Tourist"* and *"16th."* The song "Roads" (*Dorog*) from the soundtrack of *"Tourist"* itself praises the heroism of Russian fighters and was the subject of a video clip reusing images from the film.

Wagner-Style Documentaries: Demonizing the West

In parallel with Wagner's Hollywood productions, the Foundation for the Defense of National Values produces 15- to 20-minute documentaries. Shugaley, the main presenter of these documentaries, paints an alternative reality in which wars and other societal problems in the Middle East and in Africa are exploited, even caused, by the United States and its "satellites" (in particular France), accused of engaging in neocolonialist politics. In this way,



Russian mercenaries provide security for convoy with president African Republic. Source: Wiki Commons

"He echoes the classic themes of Russian and formerly Soviet discourses on Western neocolonialism toward Africa that also found expression in the launch of the *Agency for Sovereign Development.*"



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Among the films in this category are three country-specific documentaries—on Libya, Afghanistan, and Mali—as well as two films shot specifically to discredit the investigation by France Television journalists Ksenia Bolchakova and Alexandra Jousset into Wagner's activities in the Central African Republic and the charges against Maxim Shugaley. If these documentaries do not directly concern Wagner's activities, they nevertheless contribute to influence operations intended to justify the company's actions abroad.

The Central African Republic company Lobaye Invest, directly linked to Prigozhin, also produced an animated short film for children, "Lion and Bear," released in 2019. It represents the Central African Republic as an elephant that is attacked by hyenas, representing the rebels. The lion, who leads the elephant's army, is defeated. The altruistic intervention of the bear, symbolizing Russia, is decisive both for the fight and for the reconstruction of the lands destroyed by the **enemies**.

Mercenaries Speak: "Reverse Side of the Medal"

Communication around Wagner is not only done by Evgeny Prigozhin and the companies linked to him, but also by actors in Russian-speaking cyberspace that are more difficult to connect to the businessman. This is particularly the case of the group "Reverse Side of the Medal," which presents itself as a platform for the mercenaries themselves. Reverse Side of the Medal, under the name RSOTM Gray Zone, is present on Telegram (288,000 followers in June 2022), YouTube (8116,000 followers), VKontakte (105,000 followers), and Instagram (13,000 followers). It also has an official website selling many items of branded merchandise, including t-shirts and patches. Wagner is never explicitly mentioned, but indirect Wagnerian slogans can be **found**.

Reverse Side of the Medal has produced advertising clips and posters, including for a travel agency, that use images of fighters in Syria. Most of them are set to music: they use very catchy or internationally famous songs, such as Metallica's "Enter Sandman". According to the report by Ksenia Bolchakova and Alexandra Jousset, this form of communication re-exploits the propaganda codes of the Islamic State.

Reverse Side of the Medal sells two books produced by a recurring guest on their social networks, Vladlen Tatarsky: "The Leak" and "The Other Side." Both books play less on heroization à la Hollywood than on presenting the "reality of mercenary life," transforming the latter into ordinary heroes in the eyes of the reader. These books take up the themes already elaborated by Russian popular literature around the war in Donbas: many volunteers have recounted their daily exploits in the name of the "New Russia" project (Novorossiia), producing a new genre of **war literature** that became popular in Russian bookstores after 2014.

Finally, in terms of written productions, there is also a comic called "Wagner." The latter cannot be formally linked to Reverse Side of the Medal, although the group has promoted it and it has had a dedicated **Telegram channel** since December 2020. Six volumes were published between December 2020 and February 2021 and uploaded to a comic book scan site, but they have since been deleted. In this work, "Wagner" is a character in his own right, an "avenging angel" whose family was cruelly killed in his childhood and who developed supernatural powers following this tragic event. He first fought alone for the Donbas, then went to Syria, Libya, Mozambique, and the Central African Republic. In the plot, like Marvel characters, "Wagner," is ultimately recognized as a hero and a guarantor of peace by populations and governments alike.

Conclusion

“As soon as he came to power in 1999-2000, Vladimir Putin and his team sought to engage Russian popular culture to the new president’s advantage.”



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Several TV campaigns presented Putin as the incarnation of the heroes of Soviet and post-Soviet cinema (for example the Soviet spy Maksim Isayev in the highly popular Soviet series “17 Moments of Spring” or the more tragic character of Danila Bagrov in the cult films “Brat” and “Brat 2”). The Russian president has always played on the ambiguity of his image as a man of the security services and has, on many occasions, used the slang of criminal circles to establish his legitimacy to speak on behalf of the people.



Footage from "Tourist" (2021). Source: Youtube

The popular cinema of *boeviki*—Rambo-like cheap action films celebrating Russian warriors in Afghanistan, Chechnya, and post-Soviet frozen conflict in which Russia was involved—was all the rage during the 1990s and 2000s, before being gradually replaced by more official and higher-quality patriotic films. Putin has been personally committed to promoting the recognition of mixed martial arts (MMA) and for a time played on the image of the patriotic biker, as embodied by the Night Wolves movement.

It is therefore not surprising that the PMC Wagner entered this ideological market and took over an already well-established Russian cultural tradition. Moreover, it did so at a time when mercenary activity has been propelled to the forefront of the international scene. In this market, Russia has certain advantages and a brand image. It remains to be seen how this image will survive the war in Ukraine: the legion of foreign volunteers launched by Kyiv tends to recruit in similar circles, including among “white nationalist” groups, but in a geopolitical logic opposed to Russia. Time will also tell whether or not Russia’s image in the mercenary realm will be transformed by the war in Ukraine and if the branding ambitions of the PMC Wagner still have a future.

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