The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russia's Convict Soldiers Put Quantity Over Quality on the Battlefield

By Jack Margolin

October 08, 2024



Convicts stand in formation for inspection at a prison camp in Mordovia. **Stanislav Krasilnikov / TASS**

In March of 2023, Russia's state-owned broadcaster RT aired a documentary titled Zone of Redemption, following a group of Russian convicts deployed with the Wagner Group paramilitary at Bakhmut. The film opens with a title card declaring that "The prisoners were given a choice: remain in prison or redeem their guilt with blood," language borrowed directly from Stalin's 1942 order instituting penal battalions for World War II.

Russia's propaganda efforts chose not to deny the terrible reality that the state was using its prison population in the war, but to celebrate it — and even to draw a link between the present and Russia's sordid history of convict soldiers extending to the Tsarist era.

Why has Russia adopted this approach? The simplest answer is that it contributes to Russia's relative manpower advantage while allowing the state to circumvent the political costs of mobilization and deployment of conscripts.

While this logic may carry grim implications, reliant as it is on the Russian population's acceptance of the death of prisoners, it fails to explain the phenomenon fully. The strategy of convict recruitment began with the Wagner Group but was then seized on by the Ministry of Defense and has now been further institutionalized. Recently passed laws allow defendants in criminal cases to have their prosecution suspended or terminated if they sign contracts with military units, creating new opportunities for Russia's Armed Forces to press suspected criminals into service in exchange for possible amnesty.

The more instructive question then becomes whether convict forces provide Russia a meaningful advantage in its war against Ukraine. Are these forces effective on the battlefield? Are they an important component of Russia's recent gains in the war? This question is particularly important when we consider the evolution of the strategy, the competition between the Wagner Group and the military over the right to use prisoners, and Ukraine's own more recent smaller-scale use of convict recruits.

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The Wagner Group's chief curator, Russian businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin, made Russia's use of convict recruits public in September of 2022. His organization released videos of Prigozhin personally recruiting inmates from Russian prisons as part of an effort that they would dub "Project K."

He was upfront with the would-be recruits: In his signature style, Prigozhin declared that their survival was not guaranteed. But that after six months of service, they would be returned home with a pardon. Wagner ruled out convicts who had been convicted of sexual crimes and terrorism, but nonetheless succeeded in gathering and deploying tens of thousands from Russia's prison population. The exact number is prohibitively difficult to determine from statistics published by the Russian state.

More shocking even than the scale or publicity of this recruitment was how these convicts were used on the battlefield. The Wagner Group adapted its assault detachment-centric strategy that leveraged small, agile units of dismounted infantry to exploit the new influx of relatively low-value recruits. Convicts had varying levels of training, and Wagner was less concerned with their survival. This made them a critical element of Wagner's approach to the battle of attrition against Ukrainian forces at Bakhmut.

Wagner used artillery to soften entrenched Ukrainian positions, creating opportunities for assault detachments to advance. Small teams, usually comprised of convict recruits, would approach entrenched Ukrainian positions on foot before the main assault They would attempt to first suppress the Ukrainian position and then seize it through rapid advancement.

Being part of this initial wave was extremely risky. The soldiers making these forays were unprotected by vehicles, entering trenches or buildings where Ukrainians were often prepared to meet them with small arms fire. These teams were supported by nearby fire groups using automatic grenade launchers and mortars. But in the close-quarters urban combat of Bakhmut, this often posed as great a risk to Wagner as their Ukrainian adversaries.

The ability to combine drone-assisted artillery fire with mobile infantry teams allowed

Wagner to push into Ukrainian positions that could then be consolidated by more valuable, experienced troops, who would then dig in and restart the process. This approach was vital to Wagner's eventual capture of Bakhmut, though a terrifically costly one — Prigozhin himself claimed that Wagner lost twenty thousand men, a figure corroborated by Mediazona and the BBC.

Those who survived were often rewarded with amnesty and returned to civilian life. Those who attempted to desert or flee were summarily executed. A still more interesting class of convict recruits were rewarded for their battlefield successes with field promotion and official recognition of their achievements. Among these, a small number would even go on to take part in Wagner's operations in Africa, evidence that the organization saw that they were useful enough to be deployed beyond Ukraine.

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By the first months of 2023, Wagner was losing its monopoly on convict recruitment. Prigozhin declared in February that Russian authorities had officially halted their intake from Russian prisons. This was a small aspect of the broader competition between Wagner and the Ministry of Defense that would culminate in Wagner's attempted mutiny in June 2023, and his death two months later. It was more than an effort to stimy Wagner however — Russia's armed forces were beginning to shoulder into the convict recruitment space themselves.

Into the spring of 2023, international media identified units of convict recruits under Russia's Ministry of Defense referred to as "Storm Z." That June, Russia passed a law allowing convicts to join the armed forces and began incorporating convicts into units redubbed "Storm V." These units were themselves incorporated into existing Russian military and irregular units, from the 8th Guards Combined Arms Army to the forces of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic.

The effectiveness of Storm Z and Storm V units has been mixed, as they fulfill roles from relieving exhausted Russian units to acting as elite shock troops. These convict troops faced conditions that were widely reported as being poor, exploitative, and dangerous. According to Russian independent media outlet Agentstvo, non-convict soldiers were even sent into Storm Z units as a form of punishment. They might enter combat after training that can last as long as a month or as short as three days.

This pattern mirrors a broader tendency among the Russian Armed Forces to adopt practices that proved effective with the Wagner Group, from the assault detachment structure to the popularization of PMCs that are in practice irregular units subordinate to the Defense Ministry. The effectiveness of convict recruits in the Russian military is largely dependent on context and incentives, like many aspects of the Wagnerization of the Russian Armed Forces.

In the case of Wagner, specific operational practices and the use of convict recruits were effective in specific contexts — such as the limited goals of the organization at Bakhmut. The Wagner Group also had specific incentives. They needed to win at Bakhmut, even if it was a pyrrhic victory, to prove their effectiveness in comparison to the Russian military and to consequently secure their future support and financing from the state. As a result, using these

convict recruits effectively to achieve Wagner's battlefield aims was paramount, even if it meant losing them in vast numbers.

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In the case of Storm Z and Storm V units, much like the other irregular units spawned by the Defense Ministry, the primary measure of their effectiveness is in their ability to mobilize fighters. These units' operational effectiveness is more difficult to guarantee, so their primary aim is increasing the number of men deployed.

In this regard, despite the shrinking number of Russian convicts who are viable candidates for service, they have succeeded. New laws allowing for the recruitment of suspected criminals broaden this aperture to allow the Russian armed forces to continue to draw from the most vulnerable elements of Russia's population. However, this does little to make these forces more effective in the field. Their impact is still more difficult to measure against the social costs of the program: convicts who are given amnesty and return to their home communities frequently commit violent crimes, making the approach increasingly unpopular.

Consequently, the battlefield impact of Russia's contemporary efforts is best considered in the context of the range of parallel projects aimed at deploying soldiers who are neither conscripts nor mobilized. When taken together with Russia's hybrid efforts to use "volunteer," "PMC," and reserve units to buttress their manpower advantage, convict recruitment deepens Russia's advantages and exacerbates Ukraine's dilemmas.

However, the sustainability of these efforts is limited. Russia cannot rely indefinitely on recruiting convicts to avoid additional waves of unpopular mobilization. The long-term impacts of convicts on the outcome of the war will be dependent on Kyiv and its Western allies' ability to impose political costs on Russia, forcing Moscow to make still more painful decisions if they continue to wage war against Ukraine.

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