

Putin Wants Fealty, and He's Found It in Africa

As Moscow wages war in Ukraine, its mercenaries have already established control in the Central African Republic — with scant Western reaction.

By Roger Cohen Photographs by **Mauricio Lima**

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BANGUI, Central African Republic — In early March, as Russia's invasion of Ukraine entered its third week, a Russian diplomat nearly 3,000 miles away in the Central African Republic paid an unusual visit to the head of this country's top court. His message was blunt: The country's pro-Kremlin president must remain in office, indefinitely.

To do this, the diplomat, Yevgeny Migunov, the second secretary at the Russian Embassy, argued that the court should abolish the constitutional restriction limiting a president to two terms. He insisted that President Faustin-Archange Touadéra, who is in his second term and surrounds himself with Russian mercenaries, should stay on, for the good of the country.

"I was absolutely astonished," recalled Danièle Darlan, 70, then the court's president, describing for the first time the meeting on March 7. "I warned them that our instability stemmed from presidents wanting to make their rule eternal."

The Russian was unmoved. Seven months later, in October, Ms. Darlan was ousted by presidential decree in order to open the way for a referendum to rewrite the Constitution, only adopted in 2016, and abolish term limits. This would effectively cement what one Western ambassador called the Central African Republic's status as a "vassal state" of the Kremlin.

With his invasion of Ukraine, President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia unleashed a new disorder on the world. Ukraine has portrayed its fight against becoming another Russian vassal as one for universal freedom, and the cause has resonated in the United States and Europe. But in the Central African Republic, Russia already has its way, with scant Western reaction, and in the flyblown mayhem of its capital, Bangui, a different kind of Russian victory is already on display.

Russian mercenaries with the same shadowy Wagner Group now fighting in Ukraine bestride the Central African Republic, a country rich in gold and diamonds. Their impunity appears total as they move in unmarked vehicles, balaclavas covering half their faces and openly carrying automatic rifles. The large mining and timber interests that Wagner now controls are reason enough to explain why Russia wants no threat to a compliant government.

From Bangui itself, where Wagner forces steal and threaten, to Bria in the center of the country, to Mbaiki in the south, I saw Moscow's mercenaries everywhere during a two-and-a-half-week stay, despite pressure on them to rotate to fight in Ukraine.

"They threaten stability, they undermine good governance, they rob countries of mineral wealth, they violate human rights," Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken said of Wagner operatives last week during a U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit in Washington.

Yet, although feared, the Russians are often welcomed as a more effective presence in keeping a fragile peace than the more than 14,500 blue-helmeted United Nations peacekeepers in this war-torn country since 2014. As elsewhere in the developing world, the West has seemingly lost hearts and minds here. President Biden's framework for this era — the battle between democracy and rising autocracy — comes across as too binary for a time of complex challenges. Despite the war in Ukraine, even because of it, Central Africans are intensely skeptical of lessons on Western "values."

Mr. Putin's invasion of Ukraine and the inflationary spiral it has spawned has made a desperate situation more desperate in this landlocked nation. Prices for staples like cooking oil are up by 50 percent or more. Gasoline is now sold in smuggled canisters or bottles, as gas stations have none. Hunger is more widespread, in part because U.N. agencies sometimes lack the fuel to deliver food.

Yet many Central Africans do not blame Russia.



President Vladimir V. Putin's invasion of Ukraine has made a desperate situation more desperate, yet many Central Africans do not blame Russia.



Russian mercenaries shopping in October at Bangui Mall, a fancy supermarket used mostly by embassies' staff and nongovernmental organizations based in the country.



A Russian Orthodox Church in Bangui.

Tired of Western hypocrisy and empty promises, stung by the shrug that war in Africa elicits in Western capitals as compared with war in Ukraine, many people I met were inclined to support Mr. Putin over their former colonizers in Paris. If Russian brutality in Bucha or Mariupol appalls the West, Russian brutality in the Central African Republic is widely perceived to have helped quiet a decade-old conflict.

Africa will account for a quarter of humanity by 2050. China spreads its influence through huge investments, construction and loans. Mr. Biden convened the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit “to build on our shared values” and announced \$15 billion in new business deals, as the West scrambles to play catch-up and overcome a legacy of colonialism.

Mr. Putin’s Russia, by contrast, never builds a bridge, but is the master of pitiless protection services, plunder and propaganda. It wins friends through hard power, now extended to more than a dozen African countries, including Mali and Sudan. As in Syria, its readiness to use force secures the outcome it seeks.

In March, only 28 of Africa’s 54 countries voted at the United Nations to condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the same slim majority that subsequently voted to condemn Russia’s annexation of four Ukrainian regions, suggesting a growing reluctance to accept an American narrative of right and wrong.

“When your house is burning, you don’t mind the color of the water you use to put out the fire,” said Honoré Bendoit, the subprefect of Bria, a regional capital, about 280 miles (or a six-day drive on what passes for roads here) northeast of Bangui. “We have calm thanks to the Russians. They are violent and they are efficient.”



By The New York Times

Efficient, that is, in destroying or dispersing the rebel groups that have long destabilized the country through an intermittent war that has left tens of thousands dead since 2012.

When Mr. Touadéra was elected in 2016, he had effective control over only about 20 percent of the country. From 2017, mistrustful of his own army and frustrated with a French military presence that he judged ineffective, he began to turn to Russia in a bid to re-establish control over rebel-held areas.

That year, the United Nations approved an offer from the Kremlin to send military trainers to the Central African Armed Forces. The unarmed trainers morphed into Wagner’s armed mercenaries. A U.N. report last year found evidence of “excessive force, indiscriminate killings, occupation of schools and looting on a large scale.”

Today, the Wagner shock troops form a Praetorian Guard for Mr. Touadéra, who is also protected by Rwandan forces, in return for an untaxed license to exploit and export diamonds, gold and timber from virgin forests and from Russian mining interests in the country’s central region.

“Today, we have 5,000 Russians in the country,” Pascal Bida Koyagbele, the minister for strategic investment and a close confidant of Mr. Touadéra’s, said in an interview.

“Thanks to them we have retaken control of 97 percent of our territory.”

That figure is widely disputed. Another minister recently spoke of 80 percent control.

And what, I asked Mr. Koyagbele, of persistent reports of Russian brutality?

“In a war, as in Iraq,” he said, “things happen.”

‘Our Partners Are the Russians’

The Central African Republic, a country slightly bigger than Ukraine, has only two traffic lights. Neither of them works. A go-ahead Bangui mayor installed them in 2008, but that was before war, sectarian violence and pillaging propelled the nation backward. With their wiring pilfered, the lights stand as forlorn symbols of a forgotten push for progress.

Nearby, rising from the potholed, unpaved roads of what the U.N. estimates is the world’s third poorest country, billboards advertise a vodka “made in the heart of Africa with Russian technology.” The vodka, called Wa Na Wa, is sold in 30-cent sachets, and as I photographed one of the advertisements, a man screamed abuse and seized me by the throat. The poster was the work of his brother-in-law, he claimed, demanding to be paid.



An advertisement for vodka called Wa Na Wa in Bangui says it is “made in the heart of Africa with

Russian technology.” The vodka is sold in 30-cent sachets.

On Prof. Faustin-Archange Touadéra Avenue — the president already has a road named after him — a recently installed statue of four armed Russian soldiers protecting a kneeling woman with two children has pride of place.

Soldiers in red berets from the Central African Armed Forces pose beside it for photographs. Women carrying bundles on their heads and babies on their backs drift past. Nearby, a poster advertises “Granit,” a Wagner-financed movie released a year ago that features the heroics of Russian paramilitaries defending Mr. Touadéra.

On the banks of the Oubangui River, Russia has opened a cultural center, offering a carousel for children, Russian lessons for adults and movie screenings. It stands about midway between the French and Russian Embassies, a symbol of the intense competition between the Central African Republic’s former colonizer in Paris and its current master in Moscow.

In a sign of the growing venom of this conflict, Yevgeny V. Prigozhin, the Russian tycoon who heads the Wagner group and is close to Mr. Putin, accused France last week of sending a parcel bomb that severely injured Dimitri Sytyi, who is believed by Western officials to oversee Wagner’s mining and shipment of diamonds in the Central African Republic. France dismissed the accusation.

Russian propaganda is a relentless, anti-Western assault, much of it channeled through the popular Radio Lengo Songo. Marcelin Eenjikele, a journalist there, said he could not let me into the radio’s walled compound because “we have to ask permission of our Russian controllers.”

A colleague of his, who declined to give his name, shouted: “We are a new generation. The spirit of domination and the Cold War is over for us! We do not accept your worldview. Our partners are the Russians.”

Near the Russian cultural center, the Tourangelle restaurant has a lovely setting overlooking the river. On May 15, five armed Russian mercenaries appeared at 10:30 p.m. and demanded drinks. When the night guard explained that it was too late, they beat him so severely that he was urinating blood and had to be hospitalized.



The Russian cultural center in Bangui. It stands about midway between the French and Russian Embassies.



A view of the Oubangui River from La Tourangelle restaurant in Bangui.



The night guard at La Tourangelle was beaten by a group of five Russian mercenaries in May.

“They kicked him in the genitals,” the owner, Nzimbi Yele, told me. “We had the Ukraine flag hanging here, they tore it down. They wiped their hands on the American flag. I spoke to the Russian Embassy and the police. There was no reaction, none.”

Asked about the Wagner Group, Mr. Yele said, “They look at us Africans like dead leaves.”

A request to meet Mr. Touadéra to discuss Wagner’s presence, relayed through Mr. Koyagbele, the government minister, did not elicit a response.

In response to questions about the size, violence and political purpose of the Wagner Group in the Central African Republic, Mr. Prigozhin responded: “All your questions are provocative. If you are ready to provide legally formalized guarantees for the publication of my answers in full, then I am ready to give comments.” An offer from his communications office to send a contract to that end was declined.



A cemetery in Bangui. The Central African Republic has been independent from France since 1960.

‘The Russians Kill. That Is Different.’

Seldom stable since its independence from France in 1960, the Central African Republic, a nation of chronic coups and rebellions that suffers from porous borders and the calamitous governance of public office for private gain, lurched into something resembling full-scale war in December 2012.

Over the ensuing decade, a multilayered conflict involving more than a dozen armed groups — and since 2014, a U.N. peacekeeping force with an annual budget of \$1.1 billion — has festered. It has been at once a fight for power, a religious conflict between Christians and the Muslim minority, a battle for control of resources, and a proxy war of covetous neighbors.

The conflict endures, but in a minor key for now. Lizbeth Cullity, the American deputy head of the U.N. Mission, described a “hit and run, hide and seek” low-level conflict, with armed groups retreating into the bush and reappearing. “What we have is neither war nor peace,” she said.

Today, of a population of 6.1 million, 700,000 are refugees in other countries, 430,000 are internally displaced, and 3.4 million require humanitarian assistance, in what Isabella Leyh of the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in Bangui called “the most forgotten of forgotten crises.”



Residents listening to U.N. peacekeeping officers during a routine patrol in November in Bangui.



A street vendor selling fuel in October outside the United Nations headquarters in Bangui.



Workers painting a crosswalk in a residential neighborhood in October in Bangui.

Anyone flying into the Central African Republic tumbles out of a makeshift international airport onto a rutted dirt road running through a market where corrugated iron roofing, old tires and glistening offal spill into the red mud. The capital is the only place with an electricity grid in the entire vast country. It works intermittently.

Malnutrition, lack of water and the fear bequeathed by war leave their trace in sunken, bloodshot eyes. Hardship is etched in every furrowed brow across a country where 71 percent of people live on less than \$1.90 a day, by United Nations estimates.

U.N. peacekeepers save lives, but, constrained by their strict rules of engagement, they have been unable to do more than apply a very expensive bandage. They have no apparent exit strategy.



Workers unloading sand taken from the bottom of the Oubangui River in November to be used in construction projects in Bangui.

In a camp for 36,000 displaced people in Bria, the capital of the large central Haute-Kotto region, I fell into conversation with Flora Assangou, a single mother of three, who was chopping wood. She said she would return to her village one day, but only when there was security. I asked her about the peacekeepers.

“Oh, they just do patrols,” she said.

“Do the patrols help?” I asked.

She laughed.

When rebel groups kill someone, Ms. Assangou said that U.N. peacekeepers — known as MINUSCA — “take a photograph.” But “the Russians kill,” she added. “That is different. It brought us some peace.”

Peter Schaller, who heads the World Food Program operation in Bangui, said: “We’ve asked for coordination with the Russians, but they say they report only to the president. They have little or no communication with us.” This can create problems. “Sometimes they jam radio communications in areas they operate, and our air service finds it has to fly visually.”



A boy selling straw in October in Bangui.



A street market in Bangui where women were selling leaves and vegetables in November.



A vendor at a fish market in October in Bangui.

Mr. Schaller said the Russian mercenaries regularly steal fuel from planes at Bangui airport. Gerson Finarou, a prominent businessman, said he was at the presidential palace three months ago and saw “Russians arrive in unmarked vehicles, smash the pumps and take gasoline.”

There was no government response.

“Russia came with its answers to an urgent problem,” said Jean-Serge Bokassa, the interior minister in Mr. Touadéra’s government from 2016 to 2018, before growing disillusioned. He is a son of Jean-Bedel Bokassa, who ruled the country for 14 years, including two as self-proclaimed emperor. “Unfortunately, the answers included detestable methods, and unhappily today we are a Russian colony.”

The colony is a little quieter.

“You go to work in the morning and you know you will return in the evening,” said Chanel Gana, who works in the Siriri soap factory in Bangui.



Muslims praying outside a mosque in October in Bangui.

‘Russians Control Everything’

As an unmarked Russian armored truck came barreling toward us, sending mud flying, Yves Oueama, our driver, swerved sharply to the right. “The Wagner wagons never give way,” he said. “If you don’t get out of their path, you’re done.”

The road, a track really, traced a reddish line through the forest from Bria toward Bambari, 130 miles southwest. That journey takes two or three days, and Russia’s sprawling gold mine at Ndassima — whose reserves were described as “huge” by Western diplomats in Bangui — lies between the two towns.

“The Russians control everything,” said Abdoul Aziz Sali, a mining economist, noting that Wagner had set up companies to exploit the region for diamonds, gold and timber. “They are arrogant and violent. When they come to a meeting, they do not even sit down.”

Ibrahima Dosso, the head of the U.N. World Food Program office in Bria, oversees the vast camp where tens of thousands of people who have fled war are housed in makeshift shacks, reliant on the mission’s distribution of food and, once every two months, about \$50 in cash. Electricity comes only from generators, water only from wells.

Along the road to Bambari, men trudged toward distant fields carrying machetes. Women in fabrics of blazing color bore baskets of plantain.



Children taking home water collected from a well just outside a refugee camp in November in Bria.



A bazaar just outside the refugee camp in Bria.



United Nations staff in November in Bria loading an aircraft with humanitarian aid, food and water to be

relocated to another U.N. compound in the country.

In this area, and in Bria itself, Wagner forces, who are based in the former offices of a diamond-buying authority, are an unpredictable presence.

Mr. Dosso rarely leaves his office, but on this day, accompanied by a Zambian MINUSCA unit providing protection, he headed out to a village called Ngoubi and invited me along. A truck carried beans, cooking oil and U.S.A.I.D. rice in 110-pound sacks emblazoned with the stars and stripes.

The people of the village gathered as the sacks were laid out on a blue tarpaulin. Before receiving their handouts, men signed a list by pressing their forefingers dipped in blue ink; women used red. Close to two-thirds of Central Africans are illiterate.

Lucienne Wapi, 48, a mother of 12, said it was a struggle to find enough to eat and hard to sleep. She held a grandson, whose stomach was bloated from hunger. I asked if there was peace in the area.

“Peace is not just the absence of war,” she said. “If I do not eat or sleep well, it means I am not at peace.”

The town of Bria tails off into a refugee camp that is a seething shantytown of one-room structures spread over the hills. Pigs feed on garbage as women tress the hair of their little ones.

Most of the people, still afraid to return to the land they fled, have been here several years.

Fidelia Nafara, 15, was carrying her 9-month-old baby. She lives with her parents and siblings, eight to a single room. They fled a village 70 miles away in 2014. The father of her child is Muslim, and he disappeared after her own father, who is Christian, threatened him.



Fidelia Nafara, 15, with her 9-month-old child on her back, cooking outside her house in a refugee camp in November in Bria.

Wandering around the miserable camp, with its crude latrines and stinking garbage, I thought of the millions of Ukrainians who have fled Russia's unprovoked war into the arms of a wealthy European continent that thought war was behind it.

No place is immune to the war in Ukraine. But nor, in much of the world, does it take center stage as in the West.

When only 6 percent of rural homes have sanitation and less than half of children have a birth certificate, the suffering of others pales.

The war in Ukraine has changed many things, but not the fact that when people must think of their stomachs, they think of little else.

A French Withdrawal

The French Embassy in Bangui is set on sprawling grounds beside the Oubangui River. This is prime real estate, but behind coils of razor wire, the embassy is an embattled place. Last year, a mysterious fire broke out on the top floor, destroying an eighth of the building. This year, Jean-Marc Grosgrin, the French ambassador, canceled the traditional July 14 Bastille Day party because of threats from pro-Russia youth movements.



Guests, mostly foreigners, enjoying the swimming pool area of Ledger Hotel, the only five-star hotel in the Central African Republic, in central Bangui.



An AirFrance advertisement outside its headquarters in Bangui offering two flights a week to Paris.



Jean-Serge Bokassa, a son of Jean-Bedel Bokassa, a political and military leader who served as the second president of the Central African Republic, at his home in November in Bangui.

France this month completed the withdrawal of all of its forces from the Central African Republic. Six years ago, they numbered more than 1,600.

Asked about this decision, the French Ministry of the Armed Forces sent a statement blaming Central African authorities for choosing to work with a “nonstate actor, the Wagner Group, that regularly commits violence and abuses toward the civilian population and is a for-profit enterprise whose business model is based on the plundering of local resources.”

At Western embassies, there is intense concern that Mr. Touadéra will allow Wagner mercenaries to take control of the international airport, which had been protected by the last 130 French troops. For now, MINUSCA forces are guarding the airport.

Toward the end of my stay, I drove about 50 miles southwest to the sprawling Berengo military camp, an estate with an airstrip that used to belong to the Bokassa family. The former president is buried there, but his grave cannot be visited by family members because Mr. Touadéra has handed the property to the Wagner Group. Small planes fly in and out, carrying Russian booty.

I stopped at the gate and asked a Central African guard if I might go in. He opened the gate. A Russian, his face masked to his pale eyes by a balaclava, stepped out brandishing an automatic rifle. When I inquired about the Bokassa grave, he used the rifle to motion me away angrily and ducked back inside.

The gate slammed. Russia does not want prying eyes on its unconventional invasions in Africa.

A Constitutional Referendum

The Russian attempt to overturn the Central African Constitution — in effect an attempt to reproduce in the Central African Republic what Mr. Putin has contrived for himself in Russia — gradually bore fruit after the meeting with Ms. Darlan in March. In late August, Mr. Touadéra announced he had formed a committee to draft a new Constitution because “so many people have raised their voices to demand it.”

But he had underestimated Ms. Darlan.

On Sept. 23, the Constitutional Court ruled unanimously that the presidential decrees creating the committee were “unconstitutional and invalid.” Mr. Touadéra could not disavow the words of his own oath of office in which he swore not to extend his presidency beyond the two-term limit. With no Senate sitting because of postponed elections, such a procedure was unlawful.

The ruling provoked fury against Ms. Darlan from Mr. Touadéra’s supporters who, through the Russian-controlled Radio Lengo Songo and various social media outlets, called protesters to the streets.



Waiting for school transportation in November in Bangui.

Ms. Darlan told me she had met with the president a week before the court's ruling. "I asked him, 'Why such precipitation when you still have more than three years in office?' The president said he did not understand himself, but the people were in a great hurry. He looked at me and said, 'How do you want me to stop this now?'"

The initiative was difficult to stop, of course, because Moscow had demanded it, Western diplomats and officials said.

The Russian Embassy, in a written statement transmitted through the Foreign Ministry in Moscow, confirmed that Mr. Migunov had met with Ms. Darlan in March. It said that "he never discussed the issue of presidential mandates with her," but gave no indication as to why else he might have requested a meeting.

On Oct. 25, in what she called a "grotesque" maneuver, Ms. Darlan, whose term was to run to 2024, was ousted. The government argued that she was no longer qualified to head the Constitutional Court. Radio Bangui broadcast her dismissal as she arrived at her office.

Three days later, Ned Price, the State Department spokesman, issued a statement saying the United States "notes with deep concern" the "removal" of Ms. Darlan. "Judicial independence is a central tenet of democracy," he said.

It was a rare intervention. The United States, which pays about 25 percent of MINUSCA's operating costs, and for the bulk of the vast quantities of humanitarian aid that go to the Central African Republic, has taken a generally low-key approach to Wagner's predations in the country, in line with the quiet realpolitik of much of the Biden administration's foreign policy.



U.N. peacekeeping soldiers from Mauritania boarding a pickup truck before a patrol in November in Bangui.



Laborers in Bangui.



Danièle Darlan, the former president of the Constitutional Court, at her home in November in Bangui.

This month, two senators, Roger Wicker, Republican of Mississippi, and Benjamin L. Cardin, Democrat of Maryland, introduced a bill to designate Wagner a terrorist group, citing, among others things, the trafficking and raping of women in the Central African Republic. In response, Mr. Prigozhin issued a statement, saying, “We have never crossed the boundaries of what is permitted.”

Russia, through Wagner, is clearly determined to consolidate its power. Western diplomats say that the Wagner presence has shrunk since the Ukraine War — as some have been sent to fight — yet Russia’s grip on the country remains firm. Planning for the constitutional referendum is underway.

Mathias Moruba, the head of the National Elections Authority, and Charles Lemasset, the official responsible for the technology controlling the voting process, were invited to Russia for a week of instruction on electoral procedures in October.

“It is not very subtle,” said Ms. Darlan, who is being protected by U.N. peacekeepers after threats to her life.

When the referendum will be held is not clear, but its outcome seems as certain as the referendums held recently in the four Ukraine regions that Mr. Putin annexed. Elections yield only one result in the Putin-controlled world that Ukraine is fighting to defeat.

“Blood will flow,” Mr. Bokassa predicted.

“All this is dangerous,” Ms. Darlan said. “Because if you look at our history, adventures like this have never ended well.”



Near a Russian Orthodox Church in Bangui.

Ivan Nechepurenko contributed reporting from Tbilisi, Georgia, and Tom Nouvian from Paris.

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