

Putin's convict army is a nasty Nazi revival

Like Hitler, Russia's leader has rounded up the country's most dangerous prisoners and sent them to kill or die on the front

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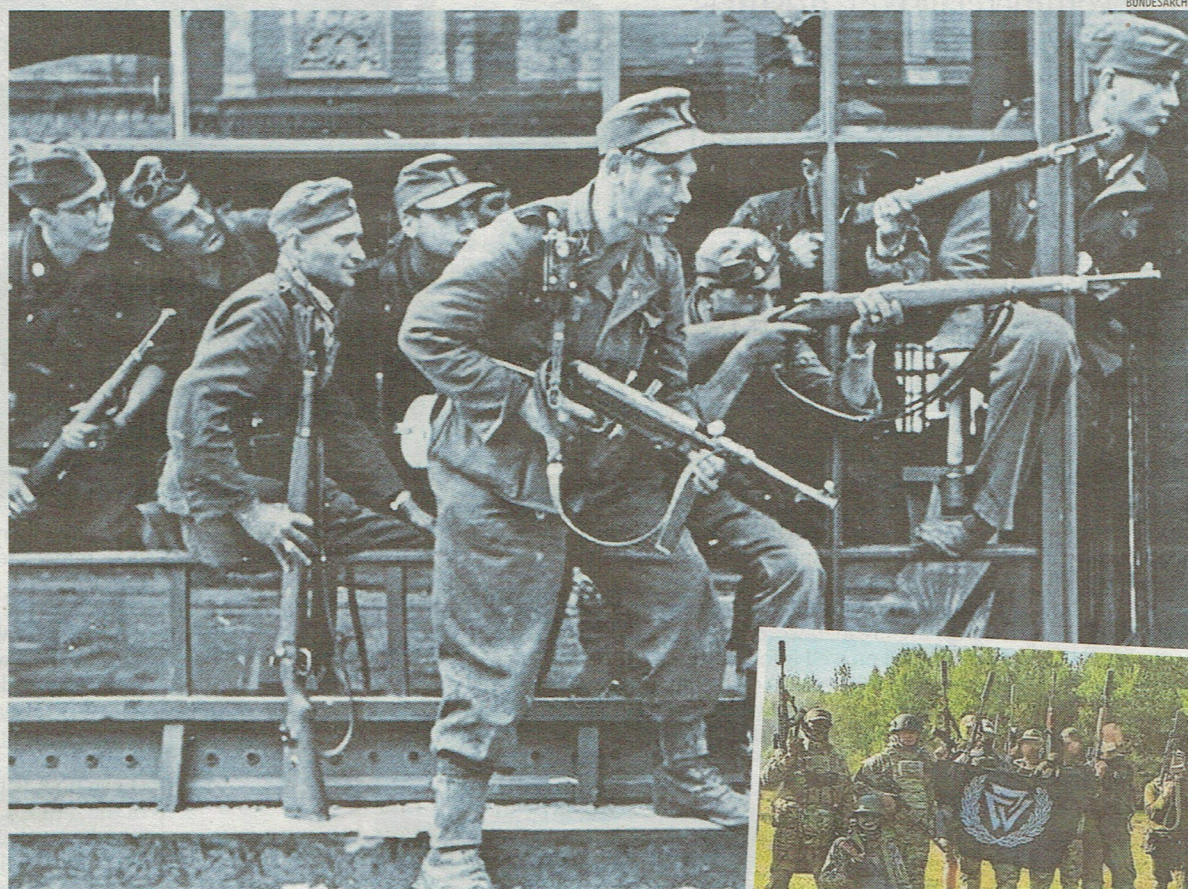
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Dictators have long favoured sending convicts into battle, scraping the prisons for desperate men of violence prepared to fight on the front lines in exchange for the promise of liberty. Little more than criminal cannon fodder, such "expendable" soldiers tend to die, or run away, in huge numbers. They are often the most brutal forces in any war, and the least dependable.

With regular conscripts running short, Napoleon formed "penal regiments" composed almost entirely of criminals and others deemed socially undesirable. The Nazi Strafbataillon of criminals, political prisoners and mutinous soldiers committed some of the worst atrocities of the war. The concept was enthusiastically embraced by Stalin: more than 400,000 men were forced into penal units made up of Gulag prisoners and ordinary soldiers who had dared to retreat. Very few survived the war.

Now it is Vladimir Putin's turn to round up some of the most dangerous elements in Russian society, put them in uniform, and send them to kill and die in Ukraine. Up to 35,000 Russian convicts are believed to have been recruited and deployed by the Wagner Group, the mercenary organisation headed by Yevgeny Prigozhin, a catering tycoon with close links to the Russian president.

In September Prigozhin was filmed recruiting at a penal colony south of Moscow, promising pardons to prisoners who sign up to fight and come back alive. "Do you know anyone who can get you out of here when you still have ten years to serve?" he declared. "There are two: God and Allah, but you would come out in a wooden box. With me you will get out of prison alive, although I do not promise you will come back alive." Anyone who deserted, he added, would be killed.



The "criminal army" Dirlwanger Brigade in Warsaw in 1944, and right, the Wagner Group, which has thousands of Russian convicts in its ranks

The convict-soldiers, including murderers and rapists, are being deployed in some of the bloodiest battles in Ukraine in the way such troops have always been used: badly trained and inexperienced, they are sent in ahead of the regular forces to draw enemy fire and enable accurate targeting. They are dying in large numbers. In the Stalinist tradition of "Not one step back", at least 40 are thought to have been summarily executed for cowardice, mutiny or desertion.

Yet there is no shortage of prisoners facing long jail terms prepared to accept the Wagner shilling. According to Mediazona, a Russian news website operating in exile, the male population of Russian prisons has dropped by 6.5 per cent since recruitment began. The head of Russia's prison system has been placed on the West's

sanctions list, accused of supporting the conscription of inmates.

Putin's deployment of a criminal army is straight out of the Nazi playbook. In March 1940 Himmler issued orders to the German justice ministry to give "suspended sentences to so-called 'honourable poachers' and, depending on their behaviour at the front, to pardon them". Soon, the Nazis were casting the net far wider, recruiting convicted murderers, sex offenders and the criminally insane.

Badly trained and poorly armed, the Strafbataillon was deployed to clear minefields, attack heavily defended positions and other operations with the highest casualty rates. Nicknamed the "marching prisons", these soldiers were often recruited on the understanding they were unlikely to survive long, and

they behaved accordingly.

The most notorious was the Dirlwanger Brigade, headed by an ardent Nazi, alcoholic sadist and convicted child molester named Oskar Dirlwanger.

Known as the "Black Hunters", the Dirlwanger Brigade was largely composed of people sentenced for major crimes. It was unleashed on the partisans and populations of the east in an orgy of indiscriminate mass murder and rape. Even some SS officers were shocked by the scale of the brigade's brutality. By February 1945, it was 4,500 strong, killing and being killed at an astonishing rate: half were lost during the suppression of the Warsaw uprising.

"In all the theatres of the Second World War, few could compete in cruelty with Dirlwanger," writes

Timothy Snyder in his book *Bloodlands*. Dirlwanger was captured in June 1945 and died in Allied custody, most likely beaten to death by a group of Polish guards.

The Nazi experience also demonstrates the limitations of deploying convicted felons as soldiers. As the end loomed, the unruly killers of the Strafbataillon deserted in droves. With the tide turning, one commander of the Dirlwanger Brigade was hanged by his own men. Most of the few survivors returned to a life of crime.

Men who have signed up out of expediency have little to gain from loyalty. Regular soldiers are usually motivated by a combination of camaraderie, patriotism, indoctrination and ingrained discipline. Mercenaries fight for cash. Conscripts do so out of obedience. But the criminal is fighting simply to get out of jail; if his chances of survival are higher retreating than advancing, he turns.

Many German army officers regarded Dirlwanger's Black Hunters with horror and disdain, as thieves and murderers in temporary uniform. In the same way, Russia's regular troops are dismayed by Prigozhin's shadow army in Ukraine, a rival competing for resources, weaponry and the all-important support of the boss.

Following Russia's military setbacks, Prigozhin weighed in with an open attack on the army commanders who had failed to prevent Ukrainian forces from retaking huge swathes of territory: "All these bastards ought to be sent to the front barefoot with just a submachine gun."

Prigozhin is not a soldier but a warlord, commanding a band of cut-throats motivated by money, opportunism and fear. He is said to harbour his own political ambitions.

Today, the man dubbed the "Chef of the Kremlin" is serving up exactly what Putin wants: a cheap supply of convict recruits to be sacrificed on the front line. Many will perish there, but others will return as free men, armed, dangerous and brutalised.

Putin has unleashed the most savage and untrustworthy dogs of war, which may yet turn and bite him.

