

# How to Kill in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Resurgence of Mercenaries on the Battlefield

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## **Sociology**

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## **Abstract:**

*This paper proposes to show that the return of mercenaries is due largely to the shift of infantry warfare from large pitched battles to small skirmishes. This research analyses the historic reasons for employment of mercenary companies, including their self-sufficiency, high level of combat experience and specialization in different fields of combat. The era of the mercenary of antiquity sees its end with the rise of the musket. It is this invention which causes drastic change in the dynamics of the battlefield, rendering mercenary companies obsolete. However, the world has seen a massive resurgence of private military companies, with the dynamics of warfare once again turning to a battlefield requiring individuals who possess the same characteristics of mercenaries past. Addressing this past and comparing it to the present, we see that mercenaries are not a new phenomenon, no matter what label is applied, and that mercenaries will continue to remain a consistent part of warfare until technology once again renders them obsolete.*

## **Introduction**

Though retaining a remarkable technical uniformity through history, the mercenary tradition systematically perpetuated itself, to the point of threatening governmental monopoly on violence. The private soldier is not a newcomer to warfare, and under the name of “mercenary,”

the first account of the profession was in the employ of King Shulgri of Ur 2094 BCE<sup>i</sup>. This paper, which will follow the evolution of mercenary forces is divided into sections as follows: first, terminology and the dynamics of warfare will be discussed in order to better illustrate the similarities between PMSCs (Private Military and Security Companies) and the mercenaries of the past. The paper will then trace the Greek mercenary trade and its development, followed by the Free Companies of the 11<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> century Europe and the impact of their systemization in different countries. This process will aid the reader in understanding the chronological development of the mercenary profession from individual soldiers for hire to registered corporate military entities. Finally, the paper will explore the decline of the mercenary profession through the widespread implementation of firearms in militaries, as well as the return of the mercenary in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a military profession. As P.W. Singer, a political scientist, writes:

“PMFs (Private Military Firms) are structured as firms and operate as businesses first and foremost. As business entities, they are often linked through complex financial ties to other firms, both within and outside their industry. In fact, many of the most active PMFs, such as Armorgroup or Vinnell, are openly part of broader multinational corporations”<sup>ii</sup>.

The PMSC economic boom, which occurred after the terrorist attacks of September 11th 2001, began as a revamping of the military utilising instruction and training offered by PMSCs, who served in non-combat role<sup>iii</sup>. While this drastic increase in mercenary activity exceeded the projections of some analyses examining the increase of PMSCs in the global market, it did not altogether contradict them; there was an expectation of their eventual increase, which had already been set in motion<sup>iv</sup>. Since then, PMSCs have become major actors in the military market, offering high wages to individuals with a wide range of specialized skill sets<sup>v</sup>, so that in some cases Special Forces find themselves in direct competition with these companies through the “poaching” of their recruits<sup>vi</sup>.

Since PMSC’s are private enterprises, individuals who are employed by these firms may work in concert with military forces, but they are not under their direct control. This lack of direct control has in the past led to acts ranging from the sacking of cities to their complete seizure, such as the sacking of Rome in 1527, or the mercenary war of Carthage in the 3<sup>rd</sup>

century B.C. This creates a future cause for alarm, since the power of these highly trained companies might strip governments of their control over the armed forces they employ.

## **Literature Review**

To begin, this section will present some clarification regarding the debate about the lineage of the PMSC industry from the mercenary profession. Once the continuity of the profession has been established, the general dynamics of warfare up to the 18<sup>th</sup> century will be illustrated in three sections, in order to contextualize the skill required of these private actors. It can be observed that the privatized and specialized nature of military and security companies, as well as their diverse breadth of employers, ties their lineage to the mercenary tradition as private actors on the battlefield. In addition, the skills that were needed in pre-firearm combat were demanding, requiring much training and experience. Mercenaries provided this skill and experience without the time required for a commander to train their own troops.

### *Terminology: PMSC VS Mercenary*

Private Military and Security Companies operate under a multitude of names. This includes Private Military Firms (PMF), Private Security Companies (PSC), Private Military Companies (PMC) and Private Military and Security Firms (PMSF).

The United Nations has criminalized mercenaries, creating incentive for PMSCs to disassociate themselves with the label, hence the more modern term utilized, “contractors”. However, the label “contractor” itself draws the image of a private entity working for a limited period, with a financial incentive, thereby once again eliciting and recalling the mercenary function.

There has been much debate regarding the definition of PMSC (or any of the other above titles) being the same as mercenary in profession, with some academics seeing them as an evolution of the mercenary.<sup>vii viii</sup> Others state that a PMSC is not connected to mercenaries because of the formal, highly corporatized nature which is stressed by these companies, causing them to disassociate themselves from rag-tag bands of soldiers for hire.<sup>ix x</sup> Interestingly, a similar corporate stance can be seen in the development of the Condottieri in Italy of the Renaissance; they maintained permanent organizations<sup>xi</sup> and had multiple employees who worked

administrative roles, such as notaries and attorneys. This arrangement more closely resembles a corporate-like structure (to the extent possible in that time) rather than a ragged mercenary band.<sup>xii</sup> We cannot completely disassociate PMSCs from the mercenary trade, especially when “many PMF employees have been mercenaries both before and after their employ, [although] their processes, relationships, and impacts within local conflicts were completely different”.<sup>xiii</sup> Nonetheless, there is a general consensus that the companies *themselves* are not mercenary enterprises; therefore, the proclivities of their employees, outside of their current contract, are not indicative of the current nature of their employment.

Combined with this popular stance, the nature of the U.N. definition of mercenary means that any individual working under the label of Private Military and Security Company can simply call himself/herself a Private Military and Security Contractor, employed by said company and therefore protected from the infamous mercenary label. However, it should be pointed out that there are still independent private actors who function directly as mercenaries, without an alternative to adopt an alternative label. Thus, PMSCs have not completely replaced the mercenary figure from warfare. Rather, it can be observed, based on the privatized nature of these military and security companies and their diverse breadth of employers, that these PMSCs owe their lineage to the mercenary tradition as private actors in otherwise state-monopolized warfare; they have expanded the services they offer to multiple sectors of the military industry.

Other analysts are more than happy to make no distinction between private entities and militaries that are hired out to fight for other nations, such as the Swiss cantons (districts) hiring out their militias to the French, Spanish, English, and Dutch in the 1700s, or the Hessians hired out by German territories to the British to fight in the American Revolution. However, this is a faulty assumption, lacking the distinction afforded to PMSCs and mercenaries today. These forces of Swiss and German troops were hired out directly under the sanction of their sovereign states as previously mentioned, and thus are not deserving of the mercenary status ascribed to them. The debate seems to be less about the fact that mercenaries are private actors with their own authority of force and PMSCs are also private entities with authority of force, but that PMSCs also provide such services as security consulting, training, and logistics, in addition to force. The end result is simply that PMSCs differentiate their services in order to create a new

label for the mercenary actor, and therefore do not wish to be associated with the stigma (or illegality) of the “mercenary” profession.

### *The Dynamics of Warfare*

In order to explain the temporal continuity of the profession, from mercenary to PMSCs, it is necessary to explain the historical appeal that mercenary forces held throughout history. Hand to hand combat on the battlefield required extensive drilling and experience, something which was very costly and time consuming if a would-be military commander wished to raise his or her own army. A much simpler and more cost-effective way to create an efficient fighting-force involved hiring mercenaries, as they were often combat experienced and usually had a specialization in select armaments, such as pikes or crossbows. Equally, however, once technology advanced to the point whereby firearms (starting with the musket) replaced all other infantry armaments, the specialized actor was no longer needed, and the mercenary found himself obsolete. Thus, the necessity of private actors is directly proportional to the level of specialized skill needed in an armed conflict.

### *Pre-Musket: Pre-1700*

Prior to the adoption of firearms, violence was not as simple as pulling a trigger. Warfare went through multiple phases and indeed cycled on itself with cavalry and missile troops, such as archers and slingers, each taking a role in the spotlight and with the infantry forever providing the backbone of every assault<sup>xiv</sup>. These roles required both constant drilling, and no small amount of skill. A highly disciplined and skilled group could confront a poorly trained group many times its number<sup>xv</sup>. Fighting throughout the Grecian age was conducted in a three foot interval; that is to say, soldiers were trained to maintain a three foot distance from each other, providing adequate space to thrust, slash and hack at their opponents<sup>xvi</sup>. What this combat-structure meant was that the battlefield was dominated by soldiers who, once committed, were required to fight under their own initiative, gradually grinding down the opposition in one-on-one combat: in other words, a duel with the individual directly in front of you. This type of combat required individuals to be in good physical condition, skilled, motivated, and disciplined. Killing an opponent demanded physical strength and the endurance to continue the assault for long periods of time. Skill was needed to survive and kill efficiently; violence was not as simple

as pointing and pulling a trigger and thus required a higher level of self-control and stamina. For instance, the Greeks and the Romans both fought in the phalanx, a tight block formation of individuals who guarded each other with their shields. This required strict discipline in order to achieve a unified speed by which the phalanx moved, lest the cohesion break. The Romans would eventually move this towards individual prowess, with soldiers spreading further apart, quite literally turning the battle into multiple duels<sup>xvii</sup>. As it was in 400 BC, so it was in 1600 AD: the infantry dominated the battlefield, backed up by cavalry and missile troops, many of which were highly specialized and required extensive training.

### *Training: Three Examples*

Training itself was aimed at conditioning an individual who was competent with a sword and shield. The person would need to learn the basic mechanisms of different strokes, as well as proper application of parrying or feinting in order to gain an advantage over their opponent. Furthermore, they would be instructed how to properly handle a shield: where to stand behind it, how to properly angle it for different incoming blows, and how to strike while still maintaining a defensive posture. This would include line drills, as a unit would need to achieve a uniform defensive posture of overlapping shields to maintain a solid line in the face of assault.

An even more drastic example was that of the longbow men. The famous English longbow men required years of training simply in order to achieve full draw of the 6-foot long bow (boys would begin instruction by age seven)<sup>xviii</sup>. Archers' skeletons of the period have been found with deformed left arm and shoulder bones, as well as twisted vertebrae, as a result of repeatedly drawing the bowstring. This was a highly specialized skill and as such saw usage throughout the 1300s-1400s. English longbow men were highly sought for by other countries for mercenary work. The famous ``White Company`` of John Hawkwood, which operated inside Italy in the fifteenth century, possessed a contingent of English longbow men, and at least one contract Hawkwood accepted specified that the archers in his company be English<sup>xix</sup> to strengthen their force.

This specialized training, combined with often sizable amounts of experience, were what made mercenaries all the more marketable to kingdoms looking for soldiers. While hiring these ``specialists`` could be costly, it was still much more profitable and time-efficient to employ these

individuals, who often came with their own equipment (in order to join a landsknecht regiment, for instance, an individual had to at least supply their own pike<sup>xx</sup>), as opposed to recruiting, equipping, feeding and training an entire army from the general population. Since skill and experience were equal to, if not more important, than numbers in combat, a highly trained and equipped mercenary force had a very strong appeal to most rulers. In fact, this became such a perpetuated practice that it continued to grow and diversify until the rise of standardized armies.

### *The Adoption of Firearms: 1400s-1700*

Initially, the adoption of firearms by militaries did not radically change the way wars were conducted. For over a century, they simply supplanted the role of the bow, and regiments of pikes augmented by cavalry and cannon continued to wage war, with the all-important pike regiments gradually grinding down their opposition<sup>xxi</sup>. By 1700, however, the pike had been completely eliminated, with the musket now being the prime weapon of choice for the infantry. This black-powdered rifle was an instrument that required raw memorization more than a specific skill to use; the individual had to complete over a dozen movements to load, aim, and fire the weapon, all while under incoming enemy fire and following the orders of his officer<sup>xxii</sup>. It was through this new method of warfare that the average soldier was no longer required to be a highly-experienced, calculating individual who could be set loose with his comrades onto the battlefield. Rather, he became a piece of machinery made to fulfill a function dictated by his officers' strict commands. The individual simply required strict drilling to perform this task, and less time was required to train an individual to an acceptable level of proficiency<sup>xxiii</sup>. The speed with which soldiers could be trained made it so that conscription gradually became preferable to hiring outside forces, and armies began to swell in size. The mercenaries that were hired at this point were almost entirely those purchased from one country by another rather than independent actors.

Despite this, the mercenary tradition, established by such individuals as the Greeks and Swiss, had developed a historic imprint of the private actor as the provider of high-specialization and short-term employ. This imprint would withstand the dynamic shift of warfare, which still found these characteristics to be an ever valuable asset.

## The Greek Mercenary

The Greek mercenary tradition is particularly important because of their systemization of the mercenary forces under their employ. The Greek mercenary trade (500 B.C. to around 100 B.C.) presented a specialized business in arms, laying the systemized and contractual groundwork for the mercenary tradition. Different regions of Greece are documented as being specialized in certain weapon types, thus providing us with an aspect of cultural diversity. Furthermore, the documentation of this regional specialization and employment shows that the Greek mercenaries were sought out to the point that states such as Carthage built their armies and selected fighters almost entirely from the mercenary pool.

The specialization of particular groups shows us a range of set skills that were marketed as needed. For instance, the Cretans were proficient in archery, and the Rhodians were skilled slingers.<sup>xxiv</sup> Also, the Arcadian people seem to have supplied the bulk of mercenary services across Greece and beyond; both Alexander the Great and Xerxes of Persia had Greek hoplites— heavy infantry—in their armies.<sup>xxv xxvi</sup> These examples suggest that the Greeks already showed proficiency in this form of soldiering; otherwise their mercenary forces would have eventually been absorbed into other native units, such as the Macedonian pike regiments, which also marched for Alexander.<sup>xxvii</sup>

Some employers who used mercenaries to maintain quasi-standing armies offered quite constant and defined contracts—a surviving example being that of Eumenes I of Pergamum, whose 260 B.C. contract included:

1. A fixed price for wine and wheat at the commissary.
2. A campaign year of ten months, the final two months being unpaid.
3. Special tax dispensation.
4. Welfare benefits for soldiers unable to find employment on the completion of a contract, and provision made for the orphans of men killed on service.<sup>xxviii</sup>

The Greek mercenary boom truly systemized the mercenary trade, actively stipulating such details as the rate of pay, length of service and campaigning year.<sup>xxix</sup> Coinage was largely

implemented in Greece by 505 BC for mercenaries' wages, and even upon the cessation of coin use in many Greek cities, the ones which continued to employ large contingents of mercenaries continued to produce large quantities of gold and silver coins.<sup>xxx</sup> This encouraged economic growth in a more modern sense. It is, however, important to note that Egypt already long had a complex and sophisticated system of financial transactions for mercenaries without coinage<sup>xxx</sup>, and Carthage also did not implement coinage until the end of the fifth century BC. Even then, they only employed coinage that was struck in Sicily, where a large portion of its mercenary contingents were hired.<sup>xxxii</sup> The Greek mercenary boom also had a further social phenomenon element to it, as mercenaries came to be acceptable in Greek society.<sup>xxxiii</sup> This is particularly of note since we see the recurrence of this fact with the Italian renaissance and arguably yet again with the PMC boom of the 21st century. The popularity of mercenary forces and their growing power, however, created the potential for a large-scale mutiny. This danger can be seen as directly proportional to the reliance and control of a governing body on hired forces.

Carthage—arguably the wealthiest city of its time—was able to afford an almost entirely mercenary army, picking and choosing exactly who to hire. In one instance the Carthaginians are recorded hiring a Spartan mercenary in 256–255 BC specifically to train their armies<sup>xxxiv</sup>; he was essentially an ancient private military consultant. However, their reliance on mercenary forces led them to be vulnerable in the face of a power they couldn't stop. A prime example would be the Carthaginian “Mercenary War”, in which mercenaries in the employ of Carthage, returning to the city in the wake of the First Punic War, found that the city elders would not pay the soldiers their back wages.<sup>xxxv xxxvi</sup> In protest, the mercenaries marched on Carthage, joined by some seventy thousand incensed Libyan peasants, thus starting the war.<sup>xxxvii xxxviii</sup> In the end, it took Carthage had to use what little wealth remained in order to employ yet more mercenaries to quash the first contingent.

While the mutiny of forces is not something exclusive to mercenaries, this level of rebellion and seeking to extract payment is not the same as a military coup—an action more commonly associated with national militaries. The Carthage Mercenary War illustrates the damage that mercenaries can wreak on their employer if they feel cheated on pay or are otherwise disgruntled. While Carthage managed to eventually overcome the mercenary revolt, a

nation that puts all of its military resources into hiring private actors in a modern setting would be equally, if not more, hard pressed to repeat this victory.

This image of mercenaries operating under their own initiative would continue in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, when the European Free Companies would act of their own accord to seek employment, banding together and moving from country to country offering their services to the highest bidder.

### **The Free Companies of Europe**

The European mercenary boom of the 13<sup>th</sup> century provides an example of military downsizing expanding the pool for mercenary recruitment, thus illustrating the effect of warfare conducted by nearly-pure mercenary armies, as it was the case of the Italian-city states. Also, an interesting example is that of Switzerland, in which one of its main exports was mercenaries.

The Free Companies (also known as Great Companies or Free Lancers) began to gain prominence throughout Europe in the 13th centuries and were influenced heavily by the development of mercenary warfare throughout the medieval ages. The Companies developed roughly in parallel with the Condottieri, who became famous throughout Europe as Italian mercenary army recruiters. Comprised of men from a multitude of countries, often former men-at-arms who found themselves out of work once warfare in their native lands ended, the Free Companies functioned as private armies that owed allegiance to no specific government. These armies had their own equipment and were available to any noble offering enough coin to employ them, creating armies comprised of multiple companies working in unison. The rise of the Free Companies has often been linked directly to the end of the first phase (1339-1360) of the Hundred Years War (1339-1453), during which both the English and French downsized their armies with the signing of the Treaty of Bretigny in 1360.<sup>xxxix</sup> This downsizing included veteran foot soldiers, as well as captains and other battlefield commanders who had been fighting for the English and French nobility. While the vast majority complied with the order to return to their peacetime occupations, many did not.<sup>xl</sup> These bands of men operated completely outside of any military or government authority, and would hire themselves out to whoever was willing to pay for their services. The Free Companies developed a fearsome reputation for looting and savagery. In one notable case, the Grand Catalan Company turned on its employer in order to

create the Duchy of Athens, transforming a successful military company into a successful political entity.<sup>xlii</sup> The Free Companies and their other mercenary cousins were often combat veterans, and offered specialized forms of combat not seen in militia units utilized by military commanders for basic line infantry. Some notable examples included the Swiss Pike Companies, the German Landsknecht, and the Italian Condottieri.

These notable examples illustrate the different approaches mercenaries took to making themselves an important asset to military commanders. They also provide examples of the further systemization and industrialization of private warfare, making mercenary employment the all-important staple of the military market.

### *The Swiss Pike Companies*

The Swiss Pike companies illustrate the controlling power of a nation that utilized its potential employment pool to create a powerful fighting force capable of offering its services in other wars, while retaining the loyalty of its mercenary base.

Switzerland during the 13–16th centuries is often compared to Greece in terms of its mercenary boom; the Swiss were the preferred mercenary forces for many armies, and the mercenary trade became a national hallmark.<sup>xliii</sup> However, the Swiss companies were often hired out en masse by their cantons (Swiss districts) to fight as mercenaries, thus gaining state approval for citizens who chose this type of employment, rather than developing independent mercenary bands.<sup>xliii xliv</sup> This made the Swiss very attractive to other nations due to their already trained and armed nature. Furthermore, it has been suggested that this was done so that Switzerland would be able to avoid directly entering warfare, as it had a large element of its population already very experienced in warfare.<sup>xlv</sup> Specifically, the Swiss were infamous for their tactics involving the pike.

The pike is by definition an exceptionally long spear (roughly 14–18 feet long) which levelled out the playing field of battle for infantry against cavalry. Prior to development of the pike, heavy cavalry had dominated the battlefield as the shock offensive force. However, the Swiss `Push of Pike` style of warfare rapidly seized the imagination of military tacticians and swayed the status quo away from heavy cavalry and towards an infantry-heavy battlefield. The Swiss initially supplied a specialized type of troops that different rulers rushed to obtain,

including French, Italian and Hungarian generals. The ‘pike men’ comprised a shock unit, which utilized thick columns of soldiers and effectively steamrolled its opponents with sheer brute force, or “push-of-pike” tactics.<sup>xlvi</sup> This made them unique, as the Swiss somewhat minimized their use of crossbows, handguns and artillery, preferring to maintain very strong pike and halberd squares.<sup>xlvii xlviii</sup>

The Swiss would see their status as specialized offensive troops end with a bitter defeat at the Battle of Bicocca in 1522, against a combined force of Spanish Tericos and German Landsknecht mercenaries that used fortifications and handguns to inflict heavy casualties.<sup>xlix 1</sup> This resulted in the Swiss beginning to adopt the formations and tactics of other units on the field, maintaining a strong ranged weapon group as well as artillery. Since their tactics were no longer a specialized selling feature (although it should be mentioned that the Swiss continued to provide mercenary troops to a multitude of countries well into the 19th century) the ascendancy of Swiss military units was over. The Swiss cantons would continue to hire out their men into the 1700s, most noticeably to France,<sup>li</sup> however, this was much more a case of a state hiring out the services of its infantry to another, than direct mercenary work.

This national support, on a more tacit level than from a modern nation, allows for intervention in conflicts in which a nation has a vested interest while avoiding a direct confrontation. Additionally, the more conflict a PMSC is involved in, the more experienced and skilled it becomes at waging warfare. Because of this advantage, the profession of mercenary kept being sought out by governing bodies. Thus, while the later Swiss foreign military units came to resemble the French Foreign Legion or the Nepalese Ghurkhas, the Swiss pike companies of the 13<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries remained state approved mercenary units.

### *German Landsknecht*

The Swiss case, however, does not necessarily resemble that of other private companies. Another example of initially state-backed mercenary forces, the German Landsknecht, did not possess the same loyalty to their state but rather fought for whoever paid them. While technically under the control, of the German Emperor, they would fight against German forces as well, illustrating that state-sponsored mercenary units did not necessarily feel loyalty to their nation of origin.

The Landsknecht units (literally meaning “foot-soldier” or “land servant”) were formed around 1490 by Emperor Maximilian I, who intended them to act as mercenaries, but on the condition that they would be willing to answer the Emperor’s call should he ever need them.<sup>lii</sup> The reason for Maximilian’s creation of these units was the Swiss Pike Regiments, currently in ascendance on the battlefield. With Germany lacking in the way of regular army and pike-infantry, Maximilian saw a chance to both create a military and to battle-harden it without having to enter direct conflict. However, this is not to say that the Landsknecht were particularly loyal: there are multiple accounts of Landsknechts fighting other Landsknechts on the battlefield, each company working for a separate employer. For instance, in a particular case, a German knight, Georg von Frundsberg, led a 10,000 man strong army of Landsknecht on campaign against Italy. However, the army soon found itself fighting opposing forces with contingents of Landsknechts working for them.<sup>liii</sup> Also, the Landsknechts were not particularly honorable individuals, they had a tendency for looting and a willingness to become violent if they felt cheated from their rightful pay. This is shown by the 1527 sack of Rome during which Landsknechts (led by the same Georg von Frundsberg) ran rampant in the city for nine months until they were paid their delayed wages.<sup>liv</sup>

In terms of specialization, the German mercenaries possessed *Zweihänder*, two-hander great swords, massive weapons that averaged four and a half feet in length. Used by the skilled *doppelsoldners*, or double-pay soldiers, these fearsome weapons would disrupt the Swiss in a pike battle and force the ‘push-of-pike’ combat into the Landsknechts’ favour. While the Landsknechts were primarily pikemen, they were willing to adapt do the changes of warfare, and diversified into use of artillery and firearms, allowing them to hold dominance with their defeat of the Swiss at Bicocca in 1522.<sup>lv</sup> This adaptation would see the German Landsknecht still in existence in the time of the Thirty Years War.<sup>lvi</sup>

### *Condottieri: The Contractors*

A further example of detachment from specific governmental control, the Italian Condottieri exemplify the development of truly business-minded warfare, as they were willing to fight for any patron who would pay for their services. They also operated with an accompaniment of scribes, lawyers and notaries, drawing up contracts with explicit stipulations and specific numbers of troops to be raised. It is from this extremely systemized approach to

conducting war that the PMSCs can most strongly trace their lineage, in which contracting warfare is a purely business-like affair.

Mercenaries were not new to the Italian city states by the 14th century. A series of invasions of Italy had resulted in German, Flemish, Brabantine and Hungarian mercenary bands appearing in the country.<sup>lvii</sup> These conflicts simply augmented the number of available private soldiers, as the English had also entered the scene by the early 13th century, and some of the famous companies still existed, albeit with new individuals.<sup>lviii</sup>

The Condottieri were recorded as treating the profession of arms as strictly business, with no loyalty guaranteed once a contract was fulfilled. Carefully-drafted documents stipulated the terms of service, number of men, and salary within the terms of the contract.<sup>lix</sup> In some cases the contract would stipulate a grace period, after the task's completion, in which the hired mercenaries could not wage war on their previous employer.<sup>lx</sup> The Condottieri employed a number of non-military personnel in order to maintain their business, including "treasurers, bankers, attorneys, secretaries, notaries and registrars".<sup>lxi</sup> These mercenary companies were also notable for what, in *The Prince*, Niccolò Machiavelli described as "slow, belated, unconvincing victories, and then sudden, bewildering defeats".<sup>lxii</sup> In this, Machiavelli seems to be referring to the reduction of slaughter on the battlefield when Condottieri companies fought each other. It is recognized that the mercenary leaders would seek to defeat, but not entirely crush their rivals, lest they lose a potential patron for employment opportunities.<sup>lxiii</sup> Alternatively, he could simply be referring to the "push-of-pike" method of combat, as he speaks in turn of John Hawkwood, a leader of an English mercenary company called the White Company.<sup>lxiv</sup> Pike combat would look much like a gradual back and forth grind, with one side finally turning and fleeing, something which would have occurred quite quickly after a long duration of seemingly standing still. Hawkwood's White Company fought effectively in the style of Swiss pike regiments, with densely packed columns of men slowly advancing on foot with lances lowered.<sup>lxv</sup> Hawkwood himself achieved quite a high status in Italy, owning multiple estates.<sup>lxvi</sup> He is an example of the range of nationalities that found work as mercenaries in Italy in the 14<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Mercenary companies would hold a monopoly on warfare inside Italy,<sup>lxvii</sup> and would in fact seize political control from their employers.<sup>lxviii</sup> The so called "Grand Company" under the command of Walter of Montreal, numbering some 7,000 men, marched from city to city

demanding tribute.<sup>lxix</sup> The Condottieri mercenary companies in Italy were willing to fight for money, but would not decimate an opponent if they had the chance. However, this unwillingness to press the advantage for decisive victory was not the result of a merciful attitude, but rather of a farsighted view of potential employment by their opponent, something which does not nurture loyal soldiers, but hands victory to whoever has the largest amount of wealth to spend.

This method of conducting war would change as nations begin to look within their own citizens to raise their armies, rather than seeking external manpower. This would temporarily end the dominance of mercenaries on the battlefield, and bring about a much more standardized soldier who fought for a single national flag.

### **The Decline of Mercenary Participation and Rise of the Conditioned Soldier**

This section will discuss the gradual decline of the mercenary as an actor on the battlefield, as the development of national armies absorbed the majority of independent soldiers into its ranks. One of the key reasons for this decline was the simplification of warfare, requiring less specialization and transforming the soldier into a mechanical operator rather than an independent combatant. An example of this reduction in specialization will be illustrated through the recruitment and training of the Prussian infantryman in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

While “mercenaries” were utilized after the 1700s, they were much more closely linked to their respective states than were the Condottieri or Landsknechts. The development of national consciousness and a wish to maintain neutrality in conflicts can be argued to be one of the reasons why military units eventually stopped being sold to other countries. However, the independent mercenary bands seem to disappear closer to the 1700s rather than the 1850s.<sup>lxx</sup> For instance, the British hired some 30,000 German soldiers to augment their own military in America during the War of Independence in 1775. These men were hired from some of the poorer provinces, such as Hesse-Kassel, which caused the Germans who served overseas to be labelled with the generic name of “Hessians”.<sup>lxxi</sup> While these individuals were indeed nationally unrelated to the conflict, and the German states were simply selling their forces to the British, the German soldiers themselves were not exactly mercenaries. That is to say, they did not seek employ with the British and merely functioned under the orders of their provincial nobility, who were paid a fee to supply such troops. Furthermore, Hesse-Kassel also supplied its troops to the

Netherlands, Venice, and England.<sup>lxxii</sup> Many countries developed distinct “foreign legions” within their military structure, some which exist to this day, such as the French Foreign Legion in the French army and the Nepalese Gurkha units in both the Indian and British armies. Despite the fact that these units can include foreign individuals, in the case of the French Foreign Legion, members must swear allegiance to France. Similarly, in the case of the Gurkhas, combatants are considered a part of the British military in all respects and therefore find themselves under British military laws and regulations.

The end result is that mercenaries in this time simply function in the uniform of the state they are utilized by, or in the uniform of the army they were contracted from, making them auxiliaries to an army rather than short-term mercenary forces.

#### *Prussia's Machine Men: The Prussian Infantryman*

A perfect example of this shift in dynamics is that of Prussia; Frederick the Great of Prussia wrote that he would not furnish the Crown with mercenaries even if he was offered “all the millions possible”<sup>lxxiii</sup> This reveals a change in mind-set which favours a long-standing army, which would arguably be more loyal to the governing body. Prussia's military development during the 18<sup>th</sup> century provides an excellent example of a largely conscripted and conditioned military, which would have absorbed potential mercenaries into its ranks. This type of simplification and standardization created an interregnum of widespread independent mercenary involvement in combat.

The Prussian army of Frederick William I (1713-1740) and his son Frederick II (1740-1786), also known as “the Great,” was in large part formed out of a near slave trade form of conscription, which utilized “crimping” gangs that would kidnap, or otherwise threaten individuals into the army.<sup>lxxiv</sup> These gangs were not limited to functioning on Prussian soil and would actually operate in surrounding principalities as well.<sup>lxxv</sup> A second source of recruits for many armies of the time was the conscription of criminals. Convicts were often offered the option of either facing execution or military service.<sup>lxxvi</sup> In fact, the Prussian army has been called “mercenary” due to its extremely high percentage of foreign soldiers that comprised its ranks.<sup>lxxvii</sup> This however is not accurate, as these soldiers were enlisted (generally for life) in its army, fought in the uniform of the Prussian nation, and in many cases had been coerced into

service. Foreign mercenaries, therefore, found themselves enlisted directly into armies by which they would otherwise have been hired on a limited capacity, and they thus served out their military careers as soldiers of the state. If they deserted, managed to escape pursuit, avoided punishment, and offered their services to another state, they most likely found themselves once again enrolled as a soldier in the standing army of that state.

The Prussian military provides an excellent example of military developments of the time, specifically the decline in autonomy individual infantrymen would have on the battlefield. A soldier of the Prussian army could expect a regimen of extremely harsh discipline, utilizing an almost universal application of corporal punishment.<sup>lxxviii</sup> This led to training in a much more conditioned sense. After thousands of hours of repetitive drilling, a Prussian soldier was expected to reflexively load, prime, and aim a rifle so that he could fire it on command.<sup>lxxix</sup> Line infantry warfare ultimately required the soldier to follow the orders of their officer to the letter, with absolutely no free thought as to the effect. An infantryman in the Prussian military looked forward to standing at attention for hours under the continuous barrage of artillery, only to walk point-blank into enemy fire before finally being ordered to return fire. At this time, muskets were not accurate, and a Prussian experiment, conducted towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, concluded that at 75 yards only 60 percent of shots would hit their intended target.<sup>lxxx</sup>

The end result made standardization and simplification key to victory; an average, almost-robotic soldier was to be directly maneuvered and commanded by highly trained and equally standardized officer corps.<sup>lxxxi</sup> This removed any market for specialization, and made recruitment a simple demand for raw bodies. Casualties in 18<sup>th</sup> century combat are estimated to have equalled any combat seen in previous centuries of warfare—the Prussian army lost 180,000 men during the Seven Years War of 1756-63.<sup>lxxxii</sup> Frederick the Great explains this new-found approach to war in the most colourful and accurate way: “If my soldiers were to begin to think, not one of them would remain in the army.”<sup>lxxxiii</sup>

### **Dynamic Shift: Warfare is Continuing to Become Asymmetrical**

The gradual shift of warfare, from being highly systemized and ritualized on the battlefield to requiring more independence and self-initiative, provided a market once again for mercenaries and a short-cut for nations to access specialized actors without the expenditure of

time and training needed to create their own. Companies such as Executive Outcomes in the 1990's re-established the mercenary tradition by providing specialized forces to nations that did not possess enough soldiers of their own, if any at all.

As conflicts continue to become more and more asymmetrical (one force is either numerically and/or technologically inferior, and has to resort to unconventional tactics and/or equipment) and the development of more and more advanced tactics, and implementation of firearms, the expectations for combat infantry likewise shift. The infantry is no longer expected to stand in a straight line to load, prime, aim, and fire a rifle regardless of both musket and cannonball crashing into their lines, nor are they expected to go ``over the top`` and march headlong into machinegun fire as they were on battlefields as Ypres and the Somme in the First World War. The battlefields themselves have changed, and now include almost every geological feature on Earth. Furthermore, battles no longer take place in removed fields or woods; they occur throughout cities and towns populated by civilians. Armies have become much smaller than they were at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>lxxxiv</sup> This is simply a matter of economics and cost-efficiency: no country can expect to equip massive armies with modern weapons, equipment, and protection without directly mobilizing its economy and putting it on a war footing.<sup>lxxxv</sup> In addition, maintaining a constant state of war can potentially reflect poorly on the nation maintaining it. On the international stage, they would appear conflict-oriented and risk censure by other nations, not to mention the fact that they would need to appeal to their own population to justify the high cost of maintaining their stance.

Mercenaries provide a quick augmentation of already standing forces, as they are already trained and often combat-experienced, offering short-term additional numbers for conflict.

### *Military Actors without Uniform*

Warfare now features heavily the irregular combatant, who has no distinctive armaments or uniform. They are essentially armed civilians (with or without military experience), with ad-hoc units and informal ranks. This type of warfare became more and more popular with conflicts from the 1950s onwards, with the initial fragmentation of the Soviet Union, the wars in Africa and the CIA-backed wars of Central and South America. What was originally known as "rural guerrilla warfare" has moved on to "urban guerilla warfare", high profile and target attacks

which are essentially methods to denigrate government authority.<sup>lxxxvi</sup> Modern day insurgents, in multiple situations throughout the world, do not operate on a specific uniform, nor do they function continuously as combat units, but may or may not actively integrate themselves in with non-combatant populations. A modern infantryman is expected to think on their feet now, and assess all potential threats in order to maximize their reaction times. There is a requirement for individuals now to work together in small teams, without military operations on the scales previously seen in the First and Second World Wars.

The mercenary profession seemed to suddenly reappear in conflicts with the Congo Crisis of the 1960s. The mercenaries were from a multitude of nations, and were from very diverse backgrounds, including veterans of the Second World War and naïve individuals with illusions of adventure. Mike Hoare, a mercenary leader in the Congo conflict, recruited his soldiers through newspaper classified ads.<sup>lxxxvii</sup> The actions of the mercenaries in the Congo conflict are very murky, and exactly all the activities they were up to is still questioned. However, mercenary units are recorded working in concert with Belgian and American forces. The Congo mercenaries simply added to the chaos of the Congo Crisis and seemed to muddle events further.

### *Executive Outcomes*

Executive Outcomes was a South African based PMSC, which set the framework for companies after it brought to the market specialization for clients in conflict resolution. Like the Free Companies of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, this PMSC was created as a result of downsizing of the military. Many of them were veterans of South African Defense Force (SADF), and had combat experience. This military career led to them marketing their specializations, and their success in Sierra Leone proved that a small military unit could defeat an enemy force many times larger if properly equipped and trained.

The actions of Executive Outcomes (EO) PMSC in Angola and Sierra Leone during the 1990s were that of an independent mercenary force hired to actively assault and destroy elements of the rebel forces. Executive Outcomes, along with Sandline, was one of the first corporations (that is to say a legally existing business entity) to strictly market combat ready forces for offensive work.<sup>lxxxviii</sup> They acted similarly to the American military during the Vietnam War, conducting seek and destroy missions through helicopter insertion of infantry. The firm spent

roughly 21 months in Sierra Leone,<sup>lxxxix</sup> during which it suffered less than 20 casualties,<sup>xc</sup> out of a total of approximately 250 individuals, actively engaging a force of an estimated 15,000 individuals (Shadow Company). Through its efforts, a peace accord was signed November 1996.<sup>xcj</sup>

The majority of Executive Outcomes was comprised of former South African Defence Force (SADF) personnel, who were downsized following the end of apartheid.<sup>xcii</sup> A large chunk of these men had fought in multiple conflicts, and many of them actually came from South Africa's special forces, which was especially hated by the South African revolutionaries (ANC). Some elements of these units, such as the Koevoet, a police counterinsurgency group, were known to have committed atrocities such as torture and killing of prisoners.<sup>xciii</sup>

This downsize is in some ways reminiscent of the English free companies that formed during the Hundred Years War, as they had nothing else to turn to except seeking further employment in warfare. An estimate of the total number of soldiers dismissed from the SADF is 60,000; generating a very large potential employment pool for EO.<sup>xciv</sup> The pay offered to individuals monthly ranged from 2,000 to 13,000 USD (United States Dollars) based on experience, and was roughly 3,500 dollars for soldiers, 4,000 for officers, and 7,500 for aircrews, roughly 5 times the South African military equivalent.<sup>xcv</sup> They brought with them a level of specialization that was valuable on the market, and in succeeding to such a large degree were able to prove the strategic, if not the moral, value of utilizing mercenaries as an alternative to standing militaries. While the origins of many of EO's employees made for some tension, as they were veterans of a military that had actively attempted to crush the forerunners of the current government, it has been argued that South Africa made use of EO's formation to forward its own interests, ``pushing`` even for EO to take on certain contracts in a number of African countries.<sup>xcvi</sup>

### **PMCS: Modern Condottieri on a Global Scale**

PMSCs, like their Condottieri forbearers, construct their forces around the needs of the contracts they acquire. They are comprised of combat veterans from multiple nations, and provide specialized combat skills.

If Executive Outcomes and the mercenaries of Africa in the 1960s were the Free Companies of Europe, the Private Military Companies (PMC) and Private Security Companies (PSC) of the 2001 private contractor boom<sup>xcvii</sup> were the Condottieri in corporate structure and contracting methods. While PMC companies did exist in a much smaller manner previous to September 11, 2001, they were already expected to continue in expansion.<sup>xcviii</sup> The attacks on the World Trade Center were akin to adding gunpowder to a jerry can and lighting a match. The private military sector overnight turned from seeing a slow and steady increase in business to becoming a thriving enterprise with multiple contracts, as the United States looked for advisors to upgrade, train, and augment its military forces in the conflicts to come. ``In Iraq, the US Government Accountability Office (GOA 2006) estimated between 20,000 and 50,000 former military personnel have been employed by PMCs supplying various military services to coalition state agencies and US based companies working on Iraq reconstruction projects``.<sup>xcix</sup>

Like the Condottieri of ages past, the PMCs build forces around the needs of their contracts, and do not have a static force always on hand. Rather, they collect their forces and then bring them to the employer. Similarly, this can be seen through surviving Condottieri contracts, in which different conditions and even negotiations can be observed.<sup>c</sup> In the case of PMSCs, the exact nature of contracts is much murkier. For the United States of America, a major employer of PMSCs, the Defense Department has seen accusations of fraud and lack of transparency with respect to its contract spending.<sup>ci</sup>

However, the supply of specialized troops for specific contracts remains the same, with the companies themselves remaining static and their ``employees,`` more often than not, functioning on much more of a contract basis (personal interview). This allows for the company to keep a dynamic and expanding roster, and for individuals themselves to go and seek further certification in other specialized forms of both combat and security proficiencies. This includes, but is not limited to: proficiency in foreign weapons (usually specifies the weapon model), firing from moving and static vehicles, firing while exiting vehicle, entering buildings, exiting buildings, securing rooms in hostile environments, operating static machine guns, handgun proficiency, explosive proficiency, ability to disarm bombs, and scarily enough, security clearance levels of United States Department of Defence. The last one is required by many different jobs in order to apply for them (pulled from triple canopy and academic websites).

Former Special Forces members are highly sought out, including Navy SEALs, Delta Force, Green Berets, British SAS, Irish Rangers, Australian SAS, Nepalese Ghurkhas, and Serbian Commandos.<sup>cii</sup> One estimate stated there were more ex-SAS than active duty members inside Iraq in 2004.<sup>ciii</sup> With offerings of very high pay compared to the salary of most special forces operators, with comparable or even lower risk, it is no wonder these individuals are willing to work for these companies, in some cases even resigning from the military in order to do so (interview).

In many cases the weaponry and equipment needed is supplied by the contracting company for the individual contractor, with the allowance that they may bring whatever gear they prefer should they choose to.<sup>civ</sup> This provides PMCs the ability to use whatever equipment they would prefer. While the base uniform may be determined by the company itself the rest is up to the individual, arguably giving them the advantage of the best tools for the job. This, of course, is not always the norm, as some cases have shown individuals turning up with equipment that is absolutely sub-standard. In addition, the availability of weaponry inside countries in which the mercenaries operate may not be adequate (interview, Shadow Company).

Another reason put forward for the increase in PMCs is the cost. The same figures have been debated as both positive and negative; a Blackwater operative in 2007 cost 1,222 per day, a sergeant in the military cost between 50,000 and 70,000 per year.<sup>cv</sup> The argument, however, does not take into account that mercenaries are utilized as contract-based individuals, and if hired for only short periods of time reduce the cost of the military significantly, especially if those hired have extensive military background and therefore have all of the training normally expected of an armed forces member.

## **Findings**

### *Demilitarization Provides Recruits*

What Executive Outcomes demonstrated on the military market was that quality could once again defeat quantity and that with the military downsizing that was increasing after the end of the cold war, a market was opening up for these soldiers to work on-demand in a multitude of countries that could not, or would not, provide their own military force. The “phenomenon” of the mercenary boom can be tied in part to global military downsizing from 6,873,000 (1990) to

3,283,000 (1997).<sup>cvi</sup> This giant downsize can be seen quite logically as placing a large number of individuals with military training on the market for recruitment by private military companies,<sup>cvi</sup> as well as opening the door in some cases to careers in criminal activities. ‘Private Intelligence’ in Eastern Europe, for example, commonly refers to former State Security personnel working closely with Crime Syndicates.<sup>cvi</sup> A simple search into the origins of Los Zetas Cartel in Mexico shows that they began in a military unit going mercenary for the very elements they were originally tasked to destroy, in almost Heart-of-Darkness-style villainy. While only alleged, Mexican and Columbian cartels are rumored to hire any former special forces members willing to work with them on instructing their soldiers on tactics,<sup>cix</sup> weapons handling and proper firing drills (with the leader of the Sinaloa Cartel ranked 701 on the list of world’s richest people in the world, it would not be considered a stretch).<sup>cx</sup>

In discussions with PMCs, the author has also heard in passing the ‘‘dark side’’ of mercenary work. That is to say individuals leaving the military for whatever reason and being immediately approached by criminal elements and recruited either with offers of cash or with threats of violence. Some of the criminal elements named were the Mexican Drug Cartels, the Russian mafia and more locally, criminal motorcycle gangs (interview).

All of this, however, is not a new phenomenon as shown by the Landsknechts and Free Companies, as well as the Greek mercenaries to a lesser degree, who when not fighting for an employer, would regularly turn to robbery, looting and general brigandage. While the modus operandi may have changed, the essence of the actions remains much the same

### *Quality over Quantity*

“There is such a thing as a ‘natural soldier’: the kind of man who derives his greatest satisfaction from male companionship, from excitement, and from the conquering of physical and psychological obstacles. He doesn’t necessarily want to kill people as such, but he will have no objections if it occurs within a moral framework that gives him a justification—like war—and if it is the price of gaining admission to the kind of environment he craves. Whether such men are born or made, I do not know, but most of them end up in armies (and many more move on again to become mercenaries, because regular army life in peacetime is too routine and boring.)” Dyer, *War*.

The resurgence of private actors in warfare, conducting combat actions on the behalf of an employer, coincides with the development of warfare that requires specialized actors who can conduct warfare independently. Asymmetrical warfare demands free thinking operators who are able to function without continuous orders from their higher ups. Furthermore, with the demobilization of military and the increasing budgets of these companies as they receive more and more lucrative contracts, PMSCs have prime choice with respect to who they hire, and are able to look for the most skilled and experienced individuals to contract. Furthermore, the industry is one that has the ability to lure individuals from the military after they have received their basic training, offering a substantial increase in pay to those willing to join.<sup>cx1</sup>

Like the English Longbow man and the Swiss pikeman, actors in modern conflict must be specialized, and private enterprises offering such services have flourished when they are in demand and willing to adapt to the needs of their employer. Current PMSCs are adapting as well; a British company called Air Partner is now offering a “global evacuation service” to multinational corporate employees in the event of crisis. As this degree of specialization and diversification occurs, so too does the centralization of violence. The mercenary trade is not a product of the 20<sup>th</sup> or 21<sup>st</sup> century, and the PMSC industry is populated by individuals who arguably, in another century, upon being downsized, would have found themselves joining a free company or a landsknecht regiment, and posed the same possible negative ramifications of freedom of force

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<sup>v</sup> Singer, *Corporate Warriors*, p.76

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viii Andreopolous, *Revisiting the Role of the PMSC*, p.140

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x Fulloon, *The New Condottieri*, p.51

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xii Holmilla, *A Private History of Violence*, p.52

xiii Singer, *Corporate Warriors*, p.46

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xxxii Russell, *The Greek as Mercenary Soldier*, p.111

xxxiii Holmilla, *The History of Private Violence*, p.47

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xxxviii Miller, *Background on the Greek Mercenary Explosion*, p.158

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xlvi Singer, *Corporate Warriors*, p.26

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xlix Ibid.

<sup>1</sup> Singer, *Corporate Warriors*, p.29

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