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Helsinki on the Hill Podcast

"Russia's Arsenal of Aggression"

Guests:
Candance Rondeaux, Director of Future Frontlines, New America and Professor, Arizona State University;
Colonel Chris Mayer, U.S. Army (Ret.)

Host:
Alex Tiersky, Senior Policy Advisor, Commission for Security and Cooperation in Europe

Transcript By
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TIERSKY: Hello and welcome back to Helsinki on the Hill, a series of conversations hosted by the United States Helsinki Commission on human rights and comprehensive security in Europe and beyond. I'm your host, Alex Tiersky.

Listeners, this is another episode of Helsinki on the Hill that is being recorded under the cloud of Russia's brutal war against Ukraine, and the human suffering that seems to be compounding on a daily basis. The Helsinki Commission, as loyal listeners, as you would expect, is deeply engaged in addressing lots of different aspects of what's going on, from refugee issues, to war crimes and accountability, to our most recent podcast episode on the information and propaganda dimensions of the war.

On today's episode we've chosen to zero in on one particularly insidious tool in what I think of as Russia's arsenal of aggression. And that is Russia's use of mercenaries, in particular against Ukraine. Our starting point for this conversation is the most widely cited Russian mercenary network, the Wagner Group, which recent press reports have linked to all sorts of violations of human rights and other atrocities, and in particular the horrific massacre at Bucha in Ukraine.

Joining us today to help us understand what Wagner is and is not, what they might be doing in Ukraine and elsewhere, why it matters, and crucially what, if anything, we do about it, are two world-class experts on exactly this subject. I want to first welcome journalist, analyst, and scholar Candance Rondeaux to the episode. Candace, thanks for joining us on Helsinki on the Hill.

RONDEAUX: Thanks for having me.

TIERSKY: Let me just tell our listeners that are you currently the director of Future Frontlines at the think tank New America, as well as a professor at Arizona State University. Of course, a long-time watcher of Wagner and related groups. Thanks again for joining us.

I want to also bring in at this time Chris Mayer, U.S. Army colonel, retired. Chris, thanks for joining us on the podcast.

MAYER: Always glad to be here. Thank you.

TIERSKY: Chris, I could spend the rest of our episode describing your extraordinarily distinguished career in public service, but for the purposes of this program I'll just underline that for many years, listeners, Chris served as the chief technical expert and a real leader at the Pentagon on the use of private security companies. Among his many current roles he advises industry and NGO groups on operations in challenging environments. To both of you, thanks, again, for making time for this.

Let's jump into the subject. As you might expect, people who listen to this podcast may well have learned that Putin's regime has chosen in its continued assault on Ukraine and elsewhere to make use of mercenaries. I previewed that the face of this phenomenon seems to be this so-called Wagner Group. As I was preparing myself to talk with both of you, I started

jotting down the words that would pop up in press reports most frequently as I read articles. And the words that stood out to me, in my utterly unscientific poll, were: shadowy, savage, atrocities, deniable, and profitable. So, Candace, I want to start with you here, particularly in the context of those words. Can you give our listeners a kind of top-line description of how they should think about what the Wagner Group is and how Russia uses mercenaries?

RONDEAUX: Well, all those words apply – shadowy, covert, deniable, atrocities. Those are all the things, certainly, I think that attach themselves to the Wagner Group, and have done for many years now. I think the best way to describe the Wagner Group is a group of contract soldiers. These are guys who roll on and off contract doing certain missions. They might deliver weapons to a place like Syria. Or they might deliver other types of things, like pipeline materials. Or they might secure an oil production facility, right? But their primary role is to support the Russian state's enterprises by just protecting them in some way or another.

And so a lot of them are, you know, former special operators. They have kind of a specialized background, many of them, in reconnaissance. They typically often work behind enemy lines. And so that's where the sneaky and shadowy part goes, right? And they also, you know, do less-covert things, right? They do what we call train and equip missions which are basically, you know, training up local forces in places like Central African Republic or Mali to be able to secure things that are important to that state. So that's kind of what they do in general.

But on a larger level, they also fulfill a kind of strategic purpose for Russia. And that is to kind of give the impression that Russia can be everywhere all the time militarily. They also provide this kind of additional strategic value in the sense that they are – they're creating a psychological impression in Russia's allies and adversaries that Russia is all powerful, that it can just do all these things and be everywhere all at once, without, you know, the United States or NATO actually knowing exactly what's going on.

TIERSKY: Sure. I want to come back to you on some of that psychological impression and the little green men phenomenon, and particularly Ukraine. We'll go much deeper on Wagner shortly. But I want to turn to Chris now with perhaps the most straightforward question I see regularly when this subject comes up. Which is, based on – based on what Candace just said, these are contract soldiers. We have contract soldiers. Has the United States not been using private contractors in wartime in, say, Iraq, Afghanistan for many years now? How is this different?

MAYER: To make a little bit of a distinction between the way that Candace described the contractors and your term of contract soldiers. The term "contract soldiers" for Russia is actually equivalent to our enlistments. And they make that distinction between somebody who is conscripted into the Russian Army versus somebody who actually voluntarily enlists. They call them contract soldiers. So these are – these are soldiers, and they work under contract, but it's not the same thing as a contract soldier.

But the big point here is that all of the things that Candace described, those are things that we use contractors for too – almost all things. Not quite. So but these are not really contractors in any meaningful way. They've got no corporate structure, and therefore no corporate

accountability. Our contractors are subject to a wide variety of military and commercial regulation, with open and publicly transparent contracts. Most pertinent to this discussion and one of the big, big differences, not only the lack of accountability, is that the U.S. – in U.S. law and defense contracts, we prohibit our contractors from participating in combat.

The very fact that we did bring Blackwater contractors to trial for the events at Nisour Square demonstrates that our contractors are accountable under the law and do not have combatant privilege. So that's the major and most important difference.

TIERSKY: Thanks, Chris. I take away the word "accountability" as an absolutely crucial part of this conversation.

MAYER: Mercenaries are used by Russia for the same reason that mercenaries have been used throughout history. They bring special capabilities that are not readily available in the regular military forces. And you heard about where Candace was talking about their special reconnaissance techniques and capabilities. And that's not something we find in rank-and-file military units at any time. They may be more readily available. They may be quicker to mobilize, easier to get hold of than regular military forces.

And – and this seems to be most important for Russian mercenaries, and you mentioned about the accountability business – they allow Moscow a pretense of denying the direct involvement in the acts performed by those mercenaries. And we get back to the lack of accountability.

TIERSKY: Mmm hmm. Something I wanted to ask you about, Chris. And I think we can transition to this now. I first asked you about how the United States uses contractors, and whether it's comparable, and the ways in which it might be distinguished. Who else in the world makes use of private security forces in this way or in any related way that we should be thinking about?

MAYER: This is a real problem here, is it gets to the question of what is a mercenary? And if we're just talking about soldiers hired to fight for a government that's not their own, OK, then – and who operate outside of regular military command structures, then we can see this in several areas of the world.

Most notable, I think, is the United Arab Emirates. You don't think about that on a regular basis, but they hire foreign soldiers to fight in Yemen. So does Saudi Arabia, but UAE happens to be the big purse strings for that one. They also are used to train anti-piracy forces on the Horn of Africa, and even to train and lead their own regular military forces. Turkey's also said to have used mercenaries, especially in the most recent conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia. And of course, that countered that Russia also used mercenaries on the other side.

So on the other hand –there's also regularly organized and incorporated private military companies, like the South African firm Specialized Tasks, Training, Equipment and Protection International, otherwise known as STTEP, and Executive Outcomes which existed in the past and exists again now. Dyck Advisory Group, another South African company.

The difference is that these regularly incorporated private military companies, and the difference between them and quasi organizations like the Wagner Group, is that the personnel of these private military companies are actually integrated into the armed forces of the country that hires them. So they're responsible under military law, under military orders. So they are, in fact, accountable.

They strictly comply with the terms of their contracts, which are open and public. And they abide by the relevant laws of war and, very importantly, train the armed forces they're working with to also abide by the laws of war – which is very important when we're dealing with developing countries and their developing militaries. But whenever we ask anything about mercenaries, we have to be very careful about what we mean by "mercenary" and the problems that they cause.

TIERSKY: That's such a great point, Chris.

Candace, I'd like to come back to you if I could, now, and continue the conversation we were having earlier on Wagner, or Wagner, and Ukraine in particular. Could you give us a sense of the linkages between this group and the upper reaches of the Putin regime? How closely linked is this to the Putin power vertical, as it were?

RONDEAUX: So, you know, Russia has really big oil and gas reserves, as well as really big oil and gas deals around the world, right? They help other countries do things like take oil and gas out of the ground and then, you know, distribute it out there in the open market.

And so, you know, big company that everybody probably has been hearing a lot about is Gazprom. The world's largest gas company. Huge, just a behemoth. And so the contractors – these contract soldiers work to help Gazprom deliver whatever services it's providing in all kinds of places, right? But what we know about Gazprom is that it's also run by Vladimir Putin's very close friends, right? (Laughs.) Some of his closest friends, you know, work in the oil and gas industry. And historically we know a lot of his power has come from parceling out parts of these state-run enterprises to his close friends from his days in the KGB, when he was a KGB officer.

But because these are also state run, right, all of that money, especially for oil and gas under Russian law, goes into Russia's sovereign wealth fund. And so that's actually kind of, like, where the money of the Russian state goes. But it's also theoretically how many people suppose that Putin is, in some way, a stakeholder in that flow of money, right? And he's very cleverly apportioned these kind of wallets, they call them, right? So that, you know, Gazprom is a kind of a wallet, and Rosneft is a kind of a wallet.

And the people that are working as contract soldiers probably don't even know any of this. They have a vague idea, right? But they don't really know all the details. It's the middlemen like Yevgeny Prigozhin, who was a long-time close associate of Putin's inner circle. Way back in the day, in the 1990s, when Putin was deputy mayor of St. Petersburg, he was very close to a lot of businessmen who had ambitions to take advantage of this new world order, you know, and to get into the business game.

And Prigozhin famously was involved in the sale of sausages. And that's how he kind of met Putin because at the time, in the 1990s, Putin was in charge of giving out licenses for international trade, OK? As deputy mayor, that was his main job. And so he was in charge of making sure that food came into the country, usually through St. Petersburg ports. And of course, that's the grocery industry. That's the sausage industry.

TIERSKY: Right.

RONDEAUX: So there's lots of overlapping old relationships, in short, between Vladimir Putin and middle managers like Yevgeny Prigozhin, and then these kind of top brass oligarchs who are responsible for the Russian state enterprises – like Gennady Timchenko, like Igor Sechin.

TIERSKY: And Prigozhin in particular, what's his relationship with the Wagner Group?

RONDEAUX: Well, you know, different U.S. and EU investigators, and U.N. investigators, have suggested that his company, Concord Management Consulting, which is one of several companies he has.

And one firm in particular that has come up a lot in the reporting, you know, by the U.N. and by others is a firm called Evro Polis, which first kind of cropped up in the conversation about whether or not the Wagner Group was working for the Russian state in Syria, right? There was a big deal where there was some sort of concession, seemingly on paper, given to this company called Evro Polis. And there was a trail of records showing that the company Evro Polis paid for the travel of some of these Wagner fighters.

And so all of that seems to show some sort of tie certainly between Yevgeny Prigozhin and his companies, mostly in St. Petersburg, and then a bunch of front companies that operate in different locations. Prigozhin is kind of thought of as the middleman, the financier of the Wagner Group. And yet, the reality is there are probably other Prigozhins out there, right?

TIERSKY: Sure. Sure. Well, let me – let me ask you – let me ask you it this way: If Putin sees a need, I imagine – do you think that he can call up his long-time associate Prigozhin, the former sausage seller, and get – whether it's the Wagner Group or other related groups – to move? That's really the connection that we're trying to establish. Is it – is it that clear of a power relationship?

RONDEAUX: I think it is more than a simple set of phone calls. I think there is plenty of evidence that Yevgeny Prigozhin is one of the largest contract providers for the ministry of defense and the ministry of emergency services, which are the two bodies that are responsible for deploying contract soldiers outside of the borders of Russia. So I think it's more than just picking up the phone, although that's right. I mean, I think there's been quite a lot of reporting from Bellingcat on the various kind of phone logs and phone calls between Putin, Prigozhin, some other power players who are in charge the GRU, which is, of course, the military

intelligence wing for Russia, as well as the FSB, which is the kind of premier vehicle for intelligence. Kind of the FBI-plus, right?

TIERSKY: Yeah.

MAYER: It kind of, like, reminds me of Churchill's statement that Russia is a mystery wrapped in an enigma, and one other layer to that too, or a matryoshka doll – the Russian stacking dolls. You know, this is – it's all very typical of anything that's ever happened in Russia at any given time. It's just the names – the names have changed, but that's all – and continue to change. But an interesting part about this is, you know, it's like, what are they getting from this? You know, literally, you know, we said follow the money. Well, follow the money for what to whom and why are they doing this?

TIERSKY: Yeah. Well, thanks. And, Candace, I want to pick that up because one aspect of this that you alluded to in your introductory comments was the extent to which the mythology around, you know, Russia's use of mercenaries is actually in and of itself strategically useful. Can you say a few more words on that?

RONDEAUX: I think what is really important to understand is that there was a point where there was no Wagner Group, OK? There was a period of time before Wagner. And we've been talking about Wagner, Wagner, Wagner so much. Obviously, especially because of Ukraine. But in that before time, right, there were just a couple of companies,– like Moran Security Group and RSB Group – who were mostly responsible for doing the basic business of delivering things for the Russian state. And then somewhere – and that – you know, that kind of changed – not that their mission changed, but, like, what happened in terms of, like, their profile and how the Russian public perceive them changed for a couple different reasons.

One, you know, sometime around 2012 there was an incident just off the coast of Nigeria where a group of Russian contractors with the Moran Security Group were captured by Nigerian authorities. And they were accused of trying to illegally ship weapons into Nigerian waters, right? National waters. And they were caught.

But as a result of that interdiction, for almost 18 months Russia was in this very uncomfortable position of having to defend these guys. And nobody knew what their mission was. And they were being accused of doing things that were nefarious, and secret, and covert, and shadowy – all these things. So they had this kind of reputational problem that came up.

And then, lo and behold, there's war in Syria. There's war in Yemen. There's war in Libya. There's – you know, just everything is popping off. And all these places are places where Russia had long-time relationships with major dictators, like Muammar Gadhafi, who of course was killed early on in the Arab Spring. Like Bashar al-Assad, right, who also, of course, was imperiled at that time. And so but Russia said, you know, publicly, we're going to keep dealing with these guys. So what, NATO, that you have this problem with them. You know, so what, U.N. We're going to finish our job. We have these contracts. We're going to deliver this stuff.

And then Turkish and Cyprus authorities decided, well, you can't because that's a breach of the embargo against sending weapons into Syria. And so there was yet another set of – series of embarrassing moments where the Moran Security Group got caught up in the wrong web. And suddenly there was no mention of the Moran Security Group. Suddenly we were talking about a new group called the Slavonic Corps, right? And then suddenly the Slavonic Corps had three different incidents where, again, this reputational problem cropped up for Russia. And it was, like, what are these guys doing here? Who do they belong to, right?

MAYER: Well, the main thing was that they got beat, you know?

Yeah, that they proved themselves – even in the context of Syria – to be relatively militarily incompetent.

RONDEAUX: At least in that first wave. And then they tried to course correct. And so that's where this mythology about the Wagner Group comes from, because Dmitry Utkin, you know, was working for first Moran Security Group, and then Slavonic Corps, and then Wagner Group, right?

And we've kind of seen this movie before, where private military contractors who get kind of a bad rep on the street or do something that's really embarrassing for a host government or a home government, then they kind of change their names. But the difference is there was also kind of a new sheriff in town, right? Yevgeny Prigozhin became, in effect, kind of the manager of what had been a very messy enterprise.

MAYER: There was a – there's an in-between step that actually shows that Russia has a hammer that they can hold – hammer and a sickle – that they can hold over these companies. When Slavonic Corps became an embarrassment to Moscow, they pulled everybody back, tried them for violating the mercenary law, and sent several of them to jail – to include Utkin. But then he was rapidly exonerated, rehabilitated, and given a new mission.

TIERSKY: Yeah. Well, look, I'd like to spend a chunk of our remaining time getting to what I think is really one of the core issues here, which is the reason this is on the front pages of a lot of the newspapers that our listeners are reading is Ukraine in particular, and allegations in particular – recently audio released by German intelligence supposedly demonstrating that Russian mercenaries, whether it's Wagner or other, were directly involved in atrocities in Ukraine, in particularly in Bucha, but also elsewhere.

Candace, let me start with you. Can you talk to us about really the dark side of this instrument of Russian power, which is the human rights violations that have been alleged, not just in Ukraine? To what extent you judge those to be – those reports to be credible and specific to these private companies?

RONDEAUX: Many of the reports that we've heard about, various Wagner Groups' members involvement in war crimes and human rights violations, seem to have quite a lot of evidence to indicate that, yes, this is a problem with this class of soldier that's operating for Russia. Examples start right in Ukraine. I spoke with several Ukrainian soldiers who said that

they had been held hostage or captive by Wagner Group soldiers in the context of the battle of Ilovaisk. They'd been tortured, right? So early on in 2014, those stories emerged right away. You know, there has been a lot of reporting about their involvement in targeted assassinations of Russian separatist figures who the Kremlin found to be maybe not very politically savvy, or perhaps unmanageable.

And that, in fact, that these Wagner Group operators were sent to kind of decapitate people who were becoming problematic within the Russian separatist forces for the Kremlin. That were not basically toeing the line. And I think that that starts around the time that the MH-17 Malaysia jetliner in 298 civilian passengers on board – that's when the trouble really begins. And we start to hear more and more about the Wagner Group because it seemed like that incident was a terrible accident that was bound to happen with people who didn't have very good rules of engagement, right?

And so – and there certainly seems to be some tie there between the people who were responsible for that act – the MH-17 downing – and others who then went on to fight in places like Syria, where we saw the beheading of a Syrian national. Not just the beheading, but the brutal, you know, dismemberment, burning, torture. And all filmed on camera and then released on Twitter and also on Vkontakte, the Russian Facebook, for all to see. As if it was some sort of – like, some trophy exercise.

There's really, like, almost no place in the world where the Wagner Group has been shown to operate where you don't have some reporting of a war crime or some sort of human rights violation in a very systematic and patterned way. So I do think that there is a lot of credible evidence out there.

The question now is, you know, what can we say about the command and control? What can we say about the structure of these different – you know, what are basically battalion tactical groups and smaller, right? What can we say about them and who is charge?

MAYER: Well, that's the advantage that the Russians have, is that they can deny any responsibility for them and say: They're not part of us or not under our command and control. And proving that they do take command and direction, that will be difficult – or, I should say, has been difficult. But since we have such a huge amount of signals intercept going on with the operations in Ukraine right now, it might not be as difficult as it once was to do that. Something that – to build on a port that Candace brought up is that Wagner has been operating in Ukraine since – I mean, even as a more organized group – since 2015-2016. They never left.

You know, when people say Wagner's back there – no, no, no. They never left. They rotate people in and out of these other places, but they always come back to Ukraine. So it wasn't just the Bundesnachrichtendienst, the German intelligence service. It was back in as early as March 8th the Ukrainian intelligence agency picked up a whole bunch of – well, they recovered them from dead bodies – but identity tags that were – that they could trace them right back to Wagner operatives in Syria.

RONDEAUX: I think one of the most glaring examples of where, like, wow, this enterprise has been so impactful in so many different war contexts, it is just those dog tags showing this – you know, this writing. It's in Syrian, it's in French, and in English, I believe. Not in Russian, interestingly. Which I thought was, like – which is actually pretty telling, right? It's sort of, like, well, this message is not for Russians, right? This message is for people who find these guys who are wounded.

So on the dog tags that the Ukrainian security forces found, you have this writing. Like, please, if this man is injured, please call this number or go to this website for Cargo 200 or Cargo 300, which is code for, you know, either KIA, killed in action, right, or wounded in action, WIA. And so that, I think is very telling because – if that could be verified, OK – and I think that's pretty well verified so far, you can probably show a pretty direct path. I mean, this is – these are those units. They were in Ukraine. They went to Syria. They did a slingshot. Maybe they went to Libya. And then they came to Ukraine because, you know, action was popping during the invasion.

TIERSKY: Yeah. Well, Candace, I want to – I want to pick up on a point you made a little bit earlier, which I thought was pretty sweeping. To paraphrase, I think you said, essentially, wherever these guys have been there is subsequent evidence of atrocities and possible war crimes. And, Chris, I want to pivot to you to ask you the big picture question, maybe for your first set of thoughts. What do we do about all this? What do we do about Wagner in particular in Ukraine, but also the misuse of the concept, the notion of private security, private military groups, private military contracting? Give us your thoughts on some policy responses.

MAYER: Well, OK. So the big challenge is, of course, how do you hold them accountable for the crimes that they've committed. And, you know, even when we're talking about crimes that were committed by SS soldiers in World War II, it took a long time after Germany was completely defeated, you know, to be able to identify who these people were, and then to tie them to specific incidents. You know, easier – you know, after World War II, as a model – was to be able to pin leaders for the responsibility of war crimes and crimes against humanity conducted by elements under their command and control.

And I think this is where we're going to have a real advantage now with the well-documented operations that we have right now, which we have the photos, we have the videos, we have satellite imagery, we have signals intercept that are going to be much easier to pin responsibility for leaders onto the actions of the units that they have. The bottom line here is that as long as there is no accountability for the operations of these quasi-mercenary organizations – no matter how you want to call them – that will inevitably lead to war crimes, other violations of the laws of war, and just general misconduct.

And the problem there is that because of that – that lack of accountability enables that. And that is only going to make things worse, because if you commit war crimes all you do is tick off the population. You make the population very, very angry with you. You create animosities that are going to last for generations. You know, we're still holding Germany responsible

generations later, and rightfully so, OK? And it will lead to – it makes it very, very difficult to come to a long-term peace, no matter which side ultimately wins.

TIERSKY: Sure. Sure.

MAYER: So what can we do? You know, I'd say – you know, sadly, I don't think that the U.S. government has done a lot about this. I think that the Helsinki Commission and the OSCE, U.S. representation to the OSCE, has done a great job of raising the visibility of the operations of these people. And we are a democracy. And raising the visibility does generate changes in our government. And hopefully we can, you know, continue to raise the visibility, get people to talk.

Now, back in 2019 the OSCE [Parliamentary Assembly] passed a resolution calling for member states to report on the actions of all of their paramilitary organizations that are operating out there. That's a good start, but the resolution didn't actually lead to any sort of change in the way that the OSCE does its reporting. That would be a good start, anyway. But what really needs to happen is, you know, 20 years ago the world was concerned about the apparent rise of private military and security companies – government contractors.

And that led to a securitization effort where governments, the International Committee of the Red Cross, got together and said: You're right. We need to do something about this. And there came out an international framework, the Montreux Document, OK? We need something like that now to address not only the Russian private military – I hate to call them private military companies because they're not legitimate – but Russian quasi-mercenary organizations, but also the more legitimate operations like the Dyck Advisory Group, like STTEP. You know, to be able to say: What is allowed? What is not allowed? And what are we going to do about it?

TIERSKY: Right. And to hold – to hold the inappropriate use or nomenclature of these kinds of groups to some sort of accountability, which is really the word that keeps coming back time and again. And, Chris, you mentioned the OSCE and the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly. Of course, the Russians are a part of these organizations. So to the extent that we can have these organizations coming to some sort of agreements, they're politically – they're politically useful in terms of trying to get the Russians to the right place on the appropriate rules of the road for the international system.

Candace, your thoughts on policy tools on this problem set.

RONDEAUX: Well, Chris has certainly done a good job of, I think, enumerating a lot of the different prongs of what has to be a multiprong strategy – raising the profile, helping the public understand but also helping important organizations like the OSCE understand what are these organizations exactly, what do they do, and in what context? And that's going to be really important.

And as he also pointed out, I think that's right, that today it's not just that, like, we have all these examples in Ukraine, it's also that there's kind of a maturation of the different groups of

people who use open-source information in all kinds of different ways – like satellite imagery and intercepts of voice conversations, right, between different commanders, right, or people on the ground. All of that stuff is now out there in the wild for anybody with just a little bit of not even much skill. I mean, it's a lot of googling, mostly, you know? (Laughs.)

So, you know, that's super helpful. I think that what we're starting to see, at least in the U.S. government and to a lesser degree in the EU, but certainly in the U.S. government we're starting to see agencies that are responsible for the oversight of things like sanctions and, you know, trying to understand Russia policy are starting to take a much more active role in elevating that information and empowering people to get that information. It's a very important piece.

But I would say – if you use the World War II example of Germany, right, the other thing that happened with Germany is it didn't want to go back to doing what it had done before. It didn't want to return to that history of military aggression, because it had been so costly for the country, right?

And while it's true that it was very difficult, and, you know, there are still some cases out there that are unresolved from World War II involving Nazi commanders, right, and SS commanders. You know, while it's true that those prosecutions took a really long time, right, and it was difficult and it was fraught to figure out who was who, it ultimately constrained the German state from returning to its previous posture of aggression.

And of course, that was actually a constant battle. So we could imagine a picture – a situation in which maybe a few years from now maybe there is some sort of settlement, I don't know what that would look like exactly, between Russia and Ukraine. But let's just imagine that that happens. But there's still this accountability issue. And I think actually when you think strategically, it's almost – it's going to sound a bit off color – but it's almost immaterial whether you actually bring them to account. What matters is that you actually try and develop those investigative leads enough so that sanctions can be brought and constrain those actors from getting out there and influencing outcomes after a settlement takes place.

MAYER: I want to say, I don't disagree with Candance at all about that. We're actually completely on board about that. I do want to mention that one of the things about investigating these that makes things different between then and now, or even now and now in different places, is that the Ukrainian prosecutor general has said openly that they're also going to investigate charges – allegations of war crimes – or, I shouldn't say war crimes – violations of the law of war – not exactly the same thing – that are alleged to have been done by Ukrainian military forces too. You know, and that gives them a huge amount of credibility, I think, as long as they actually follow through on it.

TIERSKY: Sure. Chris, thank you. That's a terrific point. And I think, again, we come back to this theme that has emerged time and again during our conversation of not just being aware of this challenge but of working together to find some sort of accountability.

As we come to the end of our time together, I want to thank you both for giving us at the podcast so much of your time and your expertise, and especially for your continued engagement

on this set of issues. Are there any final words you'd like to leave our listeners with before we sign off for this episode? Chris, let me turn to you first.

MAYER: This is nothing new. This has gone on for as long as military history has gone on. But what we have now that we didn't have before – I mean, we can go back. Alexander the Great actually paid reparations for things done by his mercenaries, OK? We need to understand that reparations can be made and that we can do better. And we have to hold people accountable for it.

TIERSKY: Thank you, sir.

Candace.

RONDEAUX: It's all about the accountability. And it's all about understanding the structures of these organizations and understanding the networked relationships of these organizations and focusing less on the kind of colorful characters – like Yevgeny Prigozhin or Dmitry Utkin. Focusing on those individuals distracts us from the big, important strategic work of constraining Russia's ability to commit crimes of aggression, like we are seeing in Ukraine.

That's going to be very important.

TIERSKY: Thank you, Candace.

With that, listeners, we've come to the end of another episode of Helsinki on the Hill. As you know, we're always interested in hearing from you. You know how to reach us. Again, thank you, Colonel Chris Mayer and Candace Rondeaux, for joining us today. Thank you both. Until the next conversation, I'm Alex Tiersky, signing off.

(END)