“A discussion of attitudes towards mercenaries in a historical perspective, and the laws that regulate their activity.”

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Mercenaries have played a prominent role in warfare throughout history. Definitions of mercenaries agree on two basic principles. The first is that mercenary soldiers are willing to fight in armies that represent states in which they are not citizens. Secondly, their primary motivation for joining foreign fighting units is for financial gain.¹ Mercenary activity has been documented by historians as far back as the Archaic and Classic ages of Ancient Greece. Moving chronologically from this point, mercenary military service has been a feature of warfare during the Middle Ages in Russia from 1000-1200, in Medieval Britain and Europe up until the 1600s, and more recently from the continental Irish regiments known as the “Wild Geese” in the 1600s and 1700s, up to the proliferation of mercenary activity in Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Mercenaries have a sullied reputation in the history of armed combat, mainly because of ethical concerns relating to those who fight with lethal force purely for financial reward, rather than for reasons that may be of higher principle such as allegiance to ones state or king, or in defence of territory. Other issues relating to disloyalty, inhumane and cruel behaviour during war, and perhaps more importantly, violent and disruptive behaviour during peacetime, have been recognised as negative traits of the mercenary soldier. These negative traits have tended to dominate the historical focus on attitudes towards mercenaries, despite short term benefits on the battlefield which an employer may enjoy as a result of hiring outside assistance. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many national laws were created in countries wishing to curb or prohibit the practices of

mercenaries. International laws within the United Nations Charter have also been enacted, but not necessarily enforced, to reflect the overall negative perception of mercenary soldiers up until the 1990s.

Trundle’s analysis of ancient Greek mercenaries from 664-250 BCE, describes the rise of mercenary service as a result of two key political and economic developments from 500BCE. The first of these was the “decentralisation of power in the Mediterranean Basin” and the fragmentation of the Persian Empire which created a demand for Greek hoplites in Persia’s western provinces. This phenomenon reached a high point during the war fought between the two sons of The Great King of Persia, Darius II, over control of the Persian Empire following his death, where over 13,000 Greek mercenaries participated in battle. The second development which attributed to the rise of mercenaries according to Trundle was the emergence of coinage at the end of the Archaic Age. This would seem a prerequisite for a mercenary to be defined in the first instance, but Trundle goes further to suggest that the earliest coinage may have been minted specifically for mercenaries.

The impact of Greek mercenary service on civilian populations was more harmful than non-mercenary soldiers because often a mercenary’s wages were drawn from plunder. This meant that an employer with few resources could attract soldiers on the basis that civilian plunder would be the soldier’s reward. The return of these mercenaries created

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3 Ibid., p.4.
4 Ibid., p.6.
problems for the Greek population itself. Large armed forces that had existed on the aggressive pillaging of others, presented a genuine threat to the civilian populations of Greek cities during peace time, when the mercenaries had no “visible means of support”.\(^5\) Bartholomees describes a genuine “picture of horror” that was presented to the Greeks when the “marauding adventurers” returned. The mercenary soldiers in Greek times were recognised as being an additional burden to civilian populations in the lands in which they fought, and in the lands in which they originated from and then returned to after battle.

In battles fought between the sons of Vladimir the Great in Kievan Rus’ during the eleventh century, mercenaries played a significant role. References in the *Primary Chronicle* contain six instances of the use of Varangian mercenaries by Iaroslav from 1015-1036.\(^6\) Franklin and Shepard describe the mercenaries as being indispensable during times of battle, but their presence during times of peace was costly to the people of Rus. During periods of idleness, waves of violence swept Kievan Rus, where fighting between the foreign soldiers and Kievans was widespread.\(^7\) Zmudzki claims that the sense of separation that existed between foreign soldiers and the Kievan Rus was not restricted to the civilian population, but also within the army in which they were co-operating. A “mutual distrust, ill will, and animosity” separated the mercenaries and the prince’s armed squad.\(^8\)

\(^7\) Ibid., pp.203-204.
\(^8\) P. Smudzki, “Mercenaries in Rus’ and Neighbouring Countries during the Tenth-Twelfth Century”, in *Kwartalnik Historyczny (The Historical Quarterly)*, 2004, Vol.111, Number 4, p.5 (Accessed online 21/1/08 - [http://cejsh.icm.edu.pl/cejsh/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?05PLAAAA0039968](http://cejsh.icm.edu.pl/cejsh/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?05PLAAAA0039968)).
Despite these negative aspects attached to employing a mercenary force, the princes of Kievan Rus’ were acutely aware that casualties amongst the band of hired soldiers, was a preferable outcome to any casualties that might be suffered by his followers, known as the *druzhina*. During Mstislav’s celebration in 1024 over Iaroslav, he callously noted the dead bodies of Varangians, as well as the bodies of his own auxiliary soldiers, the Severians, asking “who would not rejoice this…… the *druzhina* is still intact”.9

Mstislav’s words carry the implication that the lives of mercenary soldiers were more expendable than the lives of one’s loyal subjects, highlighting the political expediency with which mercenary soldiers can afford their employers beyond the battlefield.

Brown’s approach to mercenaries fighting under the Anglo Norman and Angevin monarchs in the eleventh and twelfth centuries is less critical than the authors reviewed up until this point. Brown argues that because the term “mercenary” is used above all to condemn, “any unease felt upon this subject is of our own creation”.10 The term, with its “value-laden trappings” is purified in some way according to Brown, in the text of the *Vulgate*:

> “where Christ tells of the good shepherd, prepared to make any sacrifice for his flock, and contrasts him with the *mercennarius* who would abandon it on the approach of a threatening wolf.”11

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Although Brown concedes that this reveals a lack of commitment, his claim that this is perfectly reasonable for a “hired hand” omits the logical conclusion that a lack of commitment is equal to a lack of utility. Later in the essay, Brown states that although the mercenary knight may not have been “particularly cherished”, his value was viewed in “strictly utilitarian terms”. This highlights a problem with Brown’s argument that a pragmatic approach should be encouraged when evaluating mercenary knights, rather than a moralistic stance. The platform for his argument taken from the Vulgate actually serves to undermine the utilitarian approach to mercenaries promoted by Brown.

Questions surrounding the practical value of mercenaries during the same historical period are raised by Jones in his examination of their role in warfare during the period of Chaucer’s The Canterbury Tales. The growth in the use of mercenaries during the fourteenth century was so great that these soldiers were not “mere auxiliaries, but the backbone of the army”. The problem this created for English armies which employed soldiers from foreign territories was that field commanders could not necessarily rely on the “unquestioning loyalty of his troops”. There was also the question of harmony within the ranks, which became necessarily difficult within a multi-racial force put together in a “hotch-potch” fashion. Aside from these operational problems, Jones also

12 Ibid. p.37.
15 Ibid.
makes references to the liabilities attached to inactive mercenaries, a common theme shared between writers on the subject.

During the period in which Chaucer wrote, the large numbers of hired soldiers that became unemployed during times of peace formed their own fighting forces which became known as the “Free Companies”. The “marauding freebooters of the Free Companies” were to become the “scourge of Europe throughout Chaucer’s lifetime”. The Free Companies’ association with tyranny reflected the opinion of Aristotle towards Greek Mercenaries over 1000 years earlier. War, as it was waged by the Free Companies, had “become merely an extension of banditry”.

Sir John Hawkwood became a legendary figure during the “Free Company” era that is described as a “bloody and chaotic melee of medieval mercenary warfare”. The growing power of city states in Italy during the fourteenth century accommodated the proliferation of these groups of mercenary soldiers. Hawkwood’s fame was consecrated in Florence, where recognition for his service ultimately rewarded him with a lifetime wage, a state funeral, and in 1436, the artist Paolo Ucello painted a memorial of Hawkwood in the Duomo in Florence. Jones however describes Hawkwood’s sense of loyalty to Florence as that of a businessman who cared for his reputation, “not the fidelity

16 Ibid., p.14.
of vassal to lord”.22 This is reflected in Baker’s claim that Hawkwood was able to extract an amount of money from the city of Florence “not to engage it in combat for five years”.23 This particular deal struck by Hawkwood could be described as a protection arrangement, something one might associate with a modern organised crime group. Peace is available, but for a price. This scenario signifies the power of the “Free Companies” in so far as they became a political force that threatened the more traditional power structures, and that the legitimacy for their power was based solely on violence and physical force.

During this period, the Italian philosopher Niccolo Machiavelli strongly opposed the use of mercenaries on the basis that they presented as great a threat to the employer as they did to the people in whose land in which they fought.24 The basic premise for Machiavelli’s opposition to mercenaries was that a leader will never achieve stability if his defences are based on the use of hired outside soldiers.25 He contends that if they are victorious, they have the potential to hold their employer to ransom, in defeat, they may “abandon their employer to the mercy of his enemies”.26 Machiavelli was also critical of their utilitarian value, describing them as being treacherous and without discipline, and that “in time of peace thou art dispoyled by them”.27

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26 K.Grundy, Op.Cit..
The “Wild Geese” were an Irish military community residing in Spain during the 1600s. In the literature pertaining to this group there is a distinct change in emphasis from either moralistic judgement or pragmatic justification, despite these soldiers being of a “fundamental mercenary nature”. Grainne views the Irish in this context as exiles, victims of a British administration which perceived redundant swordsman as a threat in the new planter regime that was being established in Ireland at the time. Stradling also positions the Irish in Spain at this time as escaping protestant repression, with their soldiering abilities allowing them an escape route from British rule. Any criticism of the “Wild Geese” during this time is peculiarly lacking when compared with studies of mercenary soldiers from the ancient or medieval times. It appears that historians were more intent on pursuing the esteemed position that the Irish held in Spain, which was in some part due to a shared religion uniting the two as natural allies against Britain. The omission of any documentation relating to negative aspects of mercenary soldiering in the context of the Spanish-Irish relationship during the 1600s is a notable irregularity in the overall literature pertaining to mercenaries.

From the 1800s until the late 1900s, Africa has been the location in which mercenary activity has perhaps been greatest. Cecil Rhodes and the British South Africa Company’s private army earned a reputation for extreme brutality in the later part of the nineteenth century.

29 Ibid., P.20.
The continual advancement of commercial gains in Southern Africa at the expense of the African people reached a low point when a force led by Rhodes invaded the Matabeleland in 1893, killing 5,000 Africans in a lopsided battle that saw the loss of only 50 company employees. Significant amounts of land and gold was promised to any man who took up arms, perpetuating an established pattern in mercenary warfare beginning with the Greek mercenaries more than 2000 years earlier. Duodu describes the “amorality with which Cecil Rhodes and his mercenary army dispatched the black rulers of Southern Africa into semi-landless penury”, as a shameless act which lay the foundations for racial inequity in Southern Africa that reflected moral attitudes derived from the era of slavery.

Information about mercenary action in Africa, particularly concerning the Congo crisis of the 1960s, contains more detail than the more general observations made about mercenary behaviour and the associated negative perceptions. Historians refer explicitly to the financing of mercenaries by European business interests to facilitate the secession of Katanga from Congo in the early 1960s. Belgian interests vigorously opposed U.N. efforts to remove the mercenaries and “reintegrate Katanga into the Congo”. The U.N. action was in response to the torture and murder of Congolese peasants by mercenary forces during the conflict. In this instance the question of responsibility over the control of Katanga by mercenaries was raised.

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33 Ibid. p.28.


36 Ibid., p.168.

of mercenary soldiers arises. De St. Jorre argues that it is the governments who employ mercenaries that must bear moral responsibility for the violent excesses and crimes against humanity perpetrated by such forces.38 De St. Jorre’s reference to the Katangan leadership of Moise Tshombe is true enough, but if one considers that the sole motivation for mercenary service is money,39 then it follows that the source of payment for mercenary service is responsible for the existence of mercenaries, and therefore must share the moral responsibility with governments that employ them.

The European business interests that financed the mercenaries in Congo were deeply involved in the export of raw materials from the Katanga province in the Congo, which held considerable reserves of copper, diamonds, gold and uranium.40 The connection between the exploitation of natural resources in Africa, and the appearance of mercenaries in those areas which held the resources, was an increasing phenomenon during the latter part of the twentieth century. The 1967 Nigerian Civil war involved mercenaries sent by the French government in an attempt to make some impact on Royal Dutch Shell’s monopoly on the Nigerian petroleum industry.41 French argues that the use of mercenaries in Africa “represented an opportunity to hide neo-colonial ambitions” when the option of openly controlling or manipulating newly formed nations in Africa was not diplomatically possible.42 In this way mercenaries act as a tool for controlling interests from abroad to conduct military style operations when it is doubtful that the constituencies from those outside democratic countries would approve operations of this

type. In this type of scenario mercenaries have been used to conduct illegitimate military operations outside the democratic control of the country in which they originate. It is perhaps for this reason that preceding the trial of thirteen British and American mercenaries in Angola in 1976, the British Prime Minister Harold Wilson described such soldiers as a “threat to democracy in this country”.43

Attempts to restrict or prohibit the activities of mercenaries can be traced back as far 1171 when Fredrick I and Louis VII drew up a treaty which aimed to “outlaw the use of mercenaries in their lands”.44 The intention behind the treaty was to discourage short term contracts in favour of permanent settlement for hired soldiers. This type of agreement was perhaps aimed to address the problem that short term contracting creates for mercenaries whereby they exist in one of two circumstances; they are either at war, or unemployed.

The British Foreign Enlistment Act 1870 was created to guarantee British neutrality in conflicts that involved states that were at peace with the British Empire.45 This attempt at legislation was in response to concerns regarding British nationals working on ships to be used in the Franco-Prussian War, and the involvement of British citizens in the Central and South American uprisings against their Spanish colonial rulers.46 The intention behind the creation of this law was not so much a response to concerns over the violence

44 Brown, Op.Cit., p.29
occurring in the area of conflict, but more an attempt to preserve the health of international relations between Britain, and the countries in which British mercenaries might be employed. After the events in Angola in 1976, an attempt was made to apply the Act, or perhaps amend the Act so that it would be more applicable to modern incidents involving mercenaries. It would seem that this was motivated not by a concern over international relations, but over the likelihood of criminal conduct being undertaken by British mercenaries in Angola at the time.\textsuperscript{47} The result of this process in 1976 was negligible and it should be noted that a successful application of the British Foreign Enlistment Act 1870 has not yet occurred.\textsuperscript{48}

In Australia, The Crimes (Foreign Incursions and Recruitment Act) 1978, is directed at the activities of Australian citizens who engage in hostilities in areas of conflict outside of Australia.\textsuperscript{49} It would seem that the intention behind the creation of the law was similar to the British attempt to apply the Foreign Enlistment Act 1870 during the same period, where concerns existed about the respective activities of Australian and British citizens in Africa. Although the Act was created to prohibit the activities of Australian mercenaries in southern Africa during the 1970s, it is worth noting that one of the first successful applications of the Act involved a former Australian soldier who in 1987 attempted to

\textsuperscript{47} House of Commons Statement (British Mercenaries [Angola]), February 1976. (Accessed online 28/1/08 – http://www.margaretthatcher.org/speeches/displaydocument.asp?docid=102956)
recruit a mercenary force to train West Papuan resistance fighters in Indonesia.\textsuperscript{50} The application of the Act in 1987 concerning West Papua, perhaps was more concerned with addressing international relations with Indonesia, rather than human rights in West Papua.

National laws concerning mercenaries exist in other European countries such as France, Belgium and Sweden,\textsuperscript{51} and more recently anti-mercenary laws have been passed in South Africa.\textsuperscript{52} More significantly, in 1989, U.N. General Assembly’s Resolution 44/34 set definitions for mercenaries and extradition laws that could be applied under international law.\textsuperscript{53} “The International Convention against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries” was adopted by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in October 2001. The resolution was originally intended to enshrine Articles 1 and 2 of the United Nations Charter, relating to the maintenance of international peace and security, and the abstaining by member nations of the threat or use of force.

This brief review of the history attitudes towards mercenaries in warfare reflects concerns that are based on moral grounds. The primary issues relate to the control of their behaviour during conflicts, which necessarily falls outside the democratic control of the state, and the problems attached to unemployed mercenaries returning to civilian populations during times of peace. On a diplomatic level, national laws have been created

to lessen the negative impact that mercenaries may have on international relations, whilst on an international level the United Nations has acted to create laws that reflect a concern for the effect mercenaries have on international peace and human rights.

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