

War PLC - The Rise of the New Corporate Mercenary by Stephen Armstrong.
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Mercenary soldiers are probably as old a phenomenon as warfare itself, but at no time in history have soldiers for hire been as organised, highly armed and paid as they are in the early years of the 21st century nor, backed as they are by companies with vast financial and logistical resources, as able to act as an extension of nations whose own armed forces are unable fully to perform the tasks that are demanded of them.

In War PLC, Stephen Armstrong tells the story of the rise of the corporate mercenary in the 20th century, which began tentatively in Yemen and has reached its apotheosis in Iraq, and also Afghanistan.

Armstrong details the history in a commendably readable way, explaining formative mercenary exploits in various African countries, and relying on a significant amount of personal testimony, both of soldiers and those who control the companies that employ them. Some of the bosses are ex-military, others ex-intelligence services, and in one extraordinary case an ex-food inspector and a private detective! The sums that the companies earn are astronomical, and their political reach is huge and sinister, some senior Conservative politicians, for example, holding directorships in UK PSCs.

At the heart of the book, however, rather than the bosses and their political bedfellows, are the soldiers who serve as mercenaries, many of them ex-special forces. Some are doubtless gung-ho, gun-toting psychopaths, who act with total disregard for the lives and welfare of the natives of the countries in which they are based, but the ones that Stephen Armstrong interviewed come across as thoughtful, brave, and admirably dubious about the nature of their work. Mark Britten, a nom de guerre, is a perfect example, and one of the best chapters in the book, 'Have you ever been shot at?' is devoted to him.

War PLC follows in the footsteps of several books that trace the history of major Private Security Companies, notably Blackwater by Jeremy Scahill, but its particularly British perspective makes it especially interesting to all those UK readers concerned about the British Army's over-stretch in the Middle East, as well as offering some disturbing prognostications about the likely future direction of this major 21st century phenomenon.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh