# British youths recruited by Wagner group convicted for East London firebombing in UK’s first National Security Act case



In a chilling display of foreign interference and proxy sabotage on British soil, three men—Nii Kojo Mensah, Jakeem Rose, and Ugnius Asmena—were recently convicted of aggravated arson for a March 2024 firebombing attack on a warehouse in East London used to store vital supplies for Ukraine’s war effort. The warehouse, located in Leyton, housed critical equipment including Elon Musk’s Starlink satellite communications technology, valued at around £100,000, which was destroyed in the blaze that caused approximately £1 million in damages. This attack was orchestrated by operatives linked to Russia’s Wagner mercenary group, a ruthless paramilitary organisation banned in the UK and notorious for brutal campaigns in Ukraine and beyond.

The operation highlights the expanding reach of Wagner into the UK, signalling a worrying evolution in Russia’s unconventional warfare tactics. These tactics involve recruiting disenfranchised British youths with criminal backgrounds through encrypted messaging apps like Telegram, used as a platform by Wagner to groom, task, and deploy unreliable proxies across Europe. Dylan Earl, a 20-year-old part-time drug dealer from Leicestershire, was identified as the ringleader who cultivated this local network. Despite limited Russian language skills, Earl boasted on Telegram of connecting Wagner with criminal organisations including the IRA and the Kinahan cartel, promising to deliver ‘hundreds of soldiers’ and ‘ways to make tens of millions of pounds’ for Russian interests. His motivations blended financial gain with a disturbing ideological alignment, as he proudly displayed a Russian flag in his bedroom and expressed eagerness to work for Russia.

Earl’s gang was far from professional; the arsonists were a ragtag group composed of occasional criminals and low-level offenders, whose bungled attempt at firebombing the warehouse fell short of Wagner’s expectations. The perpetrators had to return to the scene to livestream the blaze for their Russian handlers after failing to properly document the attack initially. These amateur saboteurs were captured on extensive CCTV footage, and forensic evidence including DNA linked the suspects to the crime. Despite their poor execution, Wagner operatives were reportedly willing to escalate their ambitions by plotting a kidnapping of prominent Russian dissident Evgeny Chichvarkin in London.

The involvement of men such as Jake Reeves, who admitted to receiving payments from a foreign intelligence service, and Ashton Evans, convicted of withholding information relating to a separate plot, underscores the sophistication of Russia’s proxy campaigns. Prosecutors revealed that such attacks form part of a broader, Kremlin-directed destabilisation effort across Europe, spanning sabotage, influence operations, and violent intimidation measures. Experts have noted a disturbing rise in hostile incidents attributed to Russian operations in recent years, with numbers tripling from 2022 to 2024.

The UK’s legal system is responding robustly. Dylan Earl became the first person convicted under the National Security Act 2023, recently implemented to enhance the country’s resilience against espionage, sabotage, and foreign interference. This legislation introduces new offences and investigatory powers designed to clamp down on hostile actions by state and proxy actors. Security Minister Dan Jarvis emphasised that these convictions send a strong message to those undermining UK security and national safety, promising that anyone acting on behalf of hostile states like Russia would face the full force of the law.

Law enforcement officials have highlighted the dangerous allure these recruitment efforts hold for vulnerable young men attracted by promises of money, power, and a fresh start. Yet, the Wagner group’s utilitarian view of these recruits as disposable assets has led many to their downfall, with brutal punishments for perceived disloyalty and betrayal highlighted in accounts emerging from warzones. The UK police’s Counter Terrorism Command condemned the conspirators for their reckless disregard of national security, operating as hostile agents on behalf of a foreign state.

This case casts a stark light on the UK’s vulnerability to covert sabotage linked to Russian intelligence and paramilitary groups. However, it also demonstrates progress in detection and prosecution grounded in new national security legislation and improved counter-terrorism measures. Analysts warn that Russian proxy recruitment via social media and encrypted channels is unlikely to abate, meaning vigilance and robust legal frameworks remain crucial to protecting national security in an increasingly complex geopolitical landscape.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14888629/British-betray-country-groomed-russian-mercenary-group-wagner.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[2]](https://www.ft.com/content/0adfde4c-2fd6-4d10-b8ea-94ff3dd35b32), [[4]](https://apnews.com/article/a00f7429e0688731ff1718d2c3bb855f), [[5]](https://apnews.com/article/0d7a1ec6ab4add8056fd5c5cd20efffc)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14888629/British-betray-country-groomed-russian-mercenary-group-wagner.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[3]](https://theweek.com/crime/how-did-the-wagner-group-recruit-young-british-men-for-arson-attack), [[2]](https://www.ft.com/content/0adfde4c-2fd6-4d10-b8ea-94ff3dd35b32)
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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14888629/British-betray-country-groomed-russian-mercenary-group-wagner.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.ft.com/content/0adfde4c-2fd6-4d10-b8ea-94ff3dd35b32> - Three men—Nii Kojo Mensah, Jakeem Rose, and Ugnius Asmena—were convicted of aggravated arson for a March 2024 attack on a warehouse in east London, linked to Russia's Wagner paramilitary group. The warehouse, owned by Oddisey, stored supplies for Ukraine, including Starlink technology. The attack was allegedly orchestrated via Russian-linked Telegram forums. British national Dylan Earl, who had previously pleaded guilty to violating the UK's National Security Act, was accused of coordinating the plot online with a suspected Wagner recruiter known as Privet Bot. Ashton Evans was convicted on a separate count related to an unrealized attack on Russian dissident Evgeny Chichvarkin's Mayfair businesses. Another participant, Jake Reeves, admitted to receiving funds from a foreign intelligence service. Prosecutors emphasized that the arson was a targeted act carried out on behalf of Wagner, a group banned in the UK as a terrorist organization. Some defendants were acquitted, including Paul English and Dmitrijus Paulauskas on certain charges. The case highlights the increasing use of social networks like Telegram by foreign entities to recruit UK residents for sabotage operations. ([ft.com](https://www.ft.com/content/0adfde4c-2fd6-4d10-b8ea-94ff3dd35b32?utm_source=openai))
3. <https://theweek.com/crime/how-did-the-wagner-group-recruit-young-british-men-for-arson-attack> - Three British men were convicted of aggravated arson for an attack on warehouses in East London, orchestrated by Russia's Wagner Group. The lead arsonist, Dylan Earl, admitted to collaborating with the group to sabotage facilities storing equipment for Ukraine. Of the three convicted, Earl was the only one directly in contact with Wagner operatives via the Telegram account “Privet Bot.” The Wagner Group, now under Kremlin control, is designated a terrorist organization in Britain and seeks to recruit disaffected young men using a strategy of "spot, groom, test, and task." Earl, an existing drug dealer active on pro-Russian Telegram channels, was identified, groomed, and tasked swiftly after contact. He rapidly enlisted local criminals using financial incentives, not ideology. The police uncovered thousands of messages exposing a broader Russian effort to conduct sabotage through recruited criminals. While another plot involving the kidnapping of a Russian exile failed, the case highlights increasing Russian efforts to destabilize Europe through covert acts. Analysts warn that recruits are seen as disposable by the Kremlin, but European authorities are improving at intercepting these operations. Experts emphasize that Russia’s use of online channels for sabotage is likely to persist, posing ongoing threats to UK and European security. ([theweek.com](https://theweek.com/crime/how-did-the-wagner-group-recruit-young-british-men-for-arson-attack?utm_source=openai))
4. <https://apnews.com/article/a00f7429e0688731ff1718d2c3bb855f> - A UK jury convicted three men—Jakeem Rose, Ugnius Asmena, and Nii Mensah—of aggravated arson in connection with a March 2024 attack on a warehouse in east London that stored supplies for Ukraine, including generators and Starlink satellite equipment. Authorities say the attack was orchestrated by agents of Russia’s Wagner mercenary group, acting on behalf of Russian military intelligence. The arson caused approximately £1 million ($1.35 million) in damage and is seen as part of a broader campaign of disruption across Europe attributed to Moscow and its proxies. Two other men, Dylan Earl and Jake Reeves, had already pleaded guilty to orchestrating the attack for Wagner and to offenses under the UK’s National Security Act 2023. Earl also admitted plotting further attacks and kidnapping a Russian dissident businessman in London. Paul English, 61, was acquitted, claiming ignorance of the arson plot. Ashton Evans was found guilty of withholding information on a related plot, while another accused, Dmitrijus Paulauskas, was acquitted of all charges. The case is notable for being the first to include charges under the UK’s newly implemented National Security Act. Sentencing is scheduled for the fall. ([apnews.com](https://apnews.com/article/a00f7429e0688731ff1718d2c3bb855f?utm_source=openai))
5. <https://apnews.com/article/0d7a1ec6ab4add8056fd5c5cd20efffc> - The trial of six men accused of arson at an east London business with ties to Ukraine's war effort has begun at the Old Bailey. The prosecution alleges that the March 20, 2024, fire was orchestrated by Russia’s Wagner Group, a designated terrorist organization by the UK. The defendants—Jakeem Rose, Ugnius Asmena, Nii Mensah, Paul English, Ashton Evans, and Dmitrijus Paulauskas—face charges ranging from committing arson to withholding information about planned terrorist attacks. The targeted business in Leyton supplied Starlink satellite equipment to Ukraine and sustained damage worth £1 million ($1.35 million). Prosecutors also revealed plans to attack two more Mayfair businesses owned by a Russian dissident supporting Ukraine. The attack was orchestrated by Dylan Earl and Jake Reeves, who have already admitted to the crime. Earl is said to have contacted Wagner via Telegram and was the first person charged under the UK’s National Security Act 2023. According to the prosecution, some attackers were motivated by financial gain, while others may have had political or ideological reasons. Jurors will review extensive evidence including CCTV, mobile footage, and digital records. ([apnews.com](https://apnews.com/article/0d7a1ec6ab4add8056fd5c5cd20efffc?utm_source=openai))
6. <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/the-national-security-bill> - The National Security Act 2023 introduces new measures to modernise counter-espionage laws and address the evolving state threat to national security. The Act includes offences related to espionage, sabotage, foreign interference, and obtaining benefits from foreign intelligence services. It also establishes a Foreign Influence Registration Scheme to increase transparency of foreign power influence in UK democracy and politics. The Act received Royal Assent on 11 July 2023 and came into force on 20 December 2023. ([gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/the-national-security-bill?utm_source=openai))