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## UK arson attack trial reveals how Russia—linked operatives recruited 'gig' workers for terrorism.

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— Categories: Crime



Dylan Earl, 20, once a small-time drug dealer in a run-down Midlands town, told police he was craving “a fresh start”. Disillusioned by life in England, he aimed to stage a terrorist attack in London on behalf of a Russian mercenary organisation.

Earl initially hoped to travel to Russia and enlist, believing he'd earn well and fight for a cause he viewed as noble. But his lack of Russian fluency proved a barrier. Instead, he accepted an invitation via Telegram's "Privet Bot", which solicited European recruits to join the "resistance" against Ukraine's allies. Within five days, Earl coordinated a team to set fire to a warehouse in east London connected to Ukrainian interests.

Arrested the following month, Earl pleaded guilty to aggravated arson and the UK's National Security Act. Co-defendant Jake Reeves, 23, from Croydon, also admitted guilt on similar charges. Between May and July, six more suspects faced trial at London's Old Bailey. On Tuesday, three were convicted of aggravated arson; a fourth, accused of driving the assailants, was cleared. Of two others accused of failing to report terrorist intentions, one was found guilty on one count and not guilty on the other, while the second was acquitted entirely. CNN reviewed courtroom testimony and evidence laid out at the trial.

Prosecutors allege the "Privet Bot" Telegram account was tied to Wagner, the Russian mercenary group active in Ukraine and Africa. Though now closed, messages revealed efforts to recruit operatives through low-level criminals keen either on supporting Moscow or simply after payment. This method represents a radical departure from traditional espionage: no need for long-term cultivation, just a quick Telegram "Hi" and cash.

MI5 Director-General Ken McCallum warned that Russia seeks "mayhem on British and European streets", while former MI6 chief Richard Moore described how "Russian intelligence services have gone a bit feral".

The trial shed light on the use of this gig—economy approach to terror: flexible, on—demand operatives. Prosecutors presented hundreds of social media exchanges between defendants and investigators. Earl, who trafficked cocaine and stored about £20,000 in cash and cryptocurrency, reportedly joined a pro—Wagner Telegram group on 23 June 2023. That same evening Yevgeny Prigozhin, Wagner’s founder, launched a brief uprising and died in a plane crash two months later.

Russia analyst Mark Galeotti told CNN that Wagner has effectively been subsumed into the Russian state. Smaller pro—Russian chat groups and channels, including “Grey Zone” with roughly 500,000 subscribers, often promoted “Privet Bot”, encouraging recruitment across Europe.

The warehouse targeted in Leyton was run by a Ukrainian entrepreneur supplying Starlink terminals to Ukraine. In a chilling nod to espionage—drama lore, “Privet Bot” suggested Earl watch *The Americans* to grasp the nature of his mission.

Gabrielius Landsbergis, Lithuania’s former foreign minister, told CNN that Russia now pays small sums €50 or €100, to recruit individuals for acts previously needing years of planning. He likened it to drones being cheaper and more effective than traditional weapons.

With Russia’s diplomatic corps reduced across Europe since 2022, the Kremlin turned to cost—effective, deniable methods. Attacks like Leyton might not swing a war’s outcome—but can surely unnerve Ukraine’s Western supporters. According to the CSIS think—tank, alleged Russian “shadow” incidents in Europe quadrupled from 2022 to 2023, then nearly tripled again in 2024.

Earl recruited Reeves, who in turn enlisted Nii Mensah, also from Croydon. Mensah, eager for money and excited by the cause, brought in Jakeem Rose. They then needed a driver.

That role fell to 61-year-old Paul English, who'd taken laxatives ahead of a medical procedure. He agreed to drive the group for £500. Prosecutors say he ferried Asmena, Mensah and Rose to Leyton, where the latter two set the warehouse ablaze using petrol fetched en route. The fire, reported before midnight on March 20 2024, caused over £1 million in damage. English, who maintained he simply drove a few acquaintances, was acquitted of arson.

The jury ultimately found Asmena, Rose and Mensah guilty, with English cleared. While a single warehouse fire may seem symbolic, dozens of similar operations across Europe point to a troubling trend. Britain now faces a wave of these “shadow” campaigns, low-cost, opportunistic, and enabled by modern communication networks.