

Prigozhin: Chronicle of A Death Foretold

The Elimination of a Threat

Ever since the failed coup that took place on 23 June 2023, the days of Yevgeny Prigozhin, a Russian oligarch, seemed to have been numbered. Hence, the world was not stunned when on 23 August Russian aviation officials said Yevgeny Prigozhin and nine other passengers died in a plane crash. A private plane flying between Moscow and St Petersburg, crashed near the village of Kuzhenkino, about halfway between Moscow and St Petersburg in the Tver region, North of Moscow. It seemed to be a case of 'a box having been ticked.'

Prigozhin, a wealthy businessman and convicted criminal, known as 'Putin's chef', had founded Wagner Group in 2014. Although, mercenary forces are illegal in Russia, Wagner Group was registered as a "Private Military Company" in 2022.

Prigozhin repeatedly denied links to the Wagner Group, but during the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, he travelled to Ukraine to oversee the Group's progress and was photographed at the frontline wearing military fatigues. In September 2022, he said that he had founded Wagner in 2014 to "protect the Russians" when "the genocide of the Russian population of Donbas began."^[i]

As per Dmitry Utkin, a former officer in Russia's Special Forces, also Wagner's first Field Commander, the group was named after his radio call sign. It is a reference to composer Richard Wagner, who was Adolf Hitler's favourite composer.^[ii] The 53-year-old veteran of Russia's two wars in Chechnya in 1994-2000 had been involved in the private army since its early days. In recent years, Utkin is reported to have been Prigozhin's right-hand man, responsible for overall command and combat training. Incidentally, Utkin was also one of the passengers as per the manifest.

The third prominent name amongst those who perished in the air crash is Valery Chekalov, believed to be a close Prigozhin associate with business links stretching back to the 2000s. The 47 year old was reported to have been involved in running Prigozhin's non-military business interests, which Western governments allege are used to finance the mercenary group.

The other four Wagner members who died are Yevgeny Makaryan, Sergei Propustin, Alexander Totmin and Nikolai Matusheyev, they all appear to be Wagner fighters or could be personal bodyguards.

Wagner Group

Most Wagner mercenaries initially came from Russia's elite Regiments and Special Forces. However, in 2022, Prigozhin recruited prisoners from Russian jails to fight for Wagner in Ukraine, in exchange for pardons. As per some reports there were 25,000 Wagner fighters. Apart from the recent conflict in Ukraine, the group has also been operating in Syria, Mali, the Central African Republic, Sudan and Libya.

In November 2022, Prigozhin acknowledged his companies' interference in United States elections. In February 2023, he confirmed that he was the founder and long-time manager of the Internet Research Agency, a Russian Company accused of running online propaganda and disinformation campaigns.^[iii]

Wagner troops were in the spotlight during the fighting for Bakhmut, in Eastern Ukraine, which they captured for Russia in May 2023. During the battle, Prigozhin repeatedly criticised the Russia's Army Chief, Valery Gerasimov, and the Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu, for not supplying their troops adequately specially with regards to ammunition. There were reports that a large number of them were killed and many were injured.

In June 2023, some 5,000 Wagner fighters staged a mutiny. They occupied the Southern Russian city of Rostov-on-Don and marched on Moscow, with the stated aim of ousting Gerasimov and Shoigu. The 'coup' ended once the advance was halted after a deal with President Putin, which was negotiated by Belarus' leader Alexander Lukashenko.^[iv] At that stage it was said that the Wagner's fighters could either join the regular Russian Army or go to Belarus with Prigozhin. The Polish government has recently been reported as saying there are probably between 3,500 and 5,000 Wagner mercenaries in Belarus.

Questions that are Difficult to Answer

Days after the plane crash there are still plenty of questions that remain to be answered. Principally, as to 'What caused the Crash?' Various theories have emerged as to what brought the plane down. It has been reported that a surface-to-air missile may have struck the plane, but the Pentagon has said it has no indication that one was used. A US official told BBC's US partner network CBS that an explosion on board was a more probable cause - and that it was possible a bomb went off. There is no doubt that various competing theories will continue to gain traction in the coming days,

Then is the surety that Prigozhin was on board? The US says it's "likely" he was. Though fingers have been pointed at the Russian leadership, presently there is no proof that any of them were involved.

President Putin said that Prigozhin was a "talented person" who "made serious mistakes in life but he achieved results both for himself, and for the common good." ^[v]

Implications of Prigozhin's Death

Though President Putin had called Prigozhin a 'traitor', but a lot of people were shocked at how soft Putin was toward him after the mutiny. At that time, President Putin made his feelings more than clear. He called it 'treachery' and a 'stab in the back' of Russia. He promised that the perpetrators would be punished.

But, there was a degree of incredulity in Russia when they were not. When a deal was cut between Prigozhin and the Kremlin to end the mutiny and all the charges against the Wagner founder and his fighters were dropped, there were analysts who felt it made President Putin look weak.

Prigozhin travelled freely between Belarus and Russia. President Putin met him in the Kremlin. He allowed him to live his life as if nothing had happened. Though there was little value that Prigozhin had for Putin after the mutiny. The only reason to tolerate Prigozhin seemed to be that he had some role to play in furthering Russian interests in Africa, Ukraine and Syria. However, after the crash there seems to be a method in his dealing with the situation.

For those who considered Prigozhin a threat to the state, his death represents justice. The establishment which includes the military and the close supporters of President Putin believed that Prigozhin went too far with his march to Moscow and his removal was just a matter of time.

Whereas, there are others who have said that Prigozhin's killing is a risky move by the State. It could spark discontent and a negative reaction from Prigozhin's supporters. So far there has not been any significant reaction. Those who sympathized with Prigozhin before the mutiny were disappointed when he decided to challenge the State. In fact, Prigozhin's appeal had collapsed after the mutiny. Many Russians turned their backs on Prigozhin because they felt, "You can fight against corruption in the Defence Ministry, you can criticize the military on your Telegram channel, but you can't rise up against the State". The possibility of upheaval against the Kremlin or pro-Prigozhin, pro-Wagner seems remote. It's unlikely that he will be regarded as a martyr. [vi]

The Wagner Force could now have a less charismatic new warlords to pursue Russian strategic interests in Syria, Africa and Ukraine. What needs to be watched now is how Wagner group, which is presently in Belarus, will now be employed?

Conclusion

Coincidentally, the crash took place on the same day the Russian State media reported the removal of General Sergei Surovkin: "Ex-chief of the Russian Air and Space Forces Sergei Surovkin has now been relieved of his post, while Colonel-General Viktor Afzalov, head of the Main Staff of the Air Force, is temporarily acting as commander-in-chief of the Air Force". [vii]

Surovkin had not been seen in public since the short-lived mutiny in June. Seen as an ally of the Wagner militia, questions had been raised whether he or other senior commanders aided the mutiny or at least had prior knowledge of Prigozhin's plans.

Even though it really maybe an accident, there is good reason to believe that President Putin was interested in such a crash and will see it as an act of retaliation. In fact, the crash seems to be an act of revenge by those in power and administered within two months of the coup. There is no doubt that the chef had cooked his own goose and that President Putin remains firmly in control.

Endnotes

[i] Wilhelmine Preussen, Russian oligarch Yevgeny Prigozhin admits he created the mercenary Wagner Group, September 26, 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/yevgeny-prigozhin-admits-that-he-created-the-wagner-group/>

[ii] Joshua Yaffa, Inside the Wagner Group's Armed Uprising, The New Yorker, July 31, 2023 <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/08/07/inside-the-wagner-uprising>

[iii] Russia's Prigozhin admits links to what U.S. says was election-meddling troll farm, February 14, 2023, Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russias-prigozhin-admits-links-what-us-says-was-election-meddling-troll-farm-2023-02-14/>

[iv] Wagner group mutiny against Russia updates | June 24, 2023, The Hindu <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/wagner-group-mutiny-russia-ukraine-war-june-24-2023/article67004705.ece>

[v] Jaroslav Lukiv, Putin breaks silence over Prigozhin's reported death, The BBC, 25 august 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-66609678>

[vi] Maj Gen Jagatbir Singh, Death of Yevgeny Prigozhin: How 'Putin's chef' cooked his own goose, 26 August 2023 <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-appoints-new-aerospace-forces-chief-after-incumbent-vanished-during-2023-08-23/>

[vii] Andrew Osborn, Russia removes 'General Armageddon' as air force chief after mutiny-related disappearance, 23 August 2023 <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-appoints-new-aerospace-forces-chief-after-incumbent-vanished-during-2023-08-23/>

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