

Plane that reportedly carried Wagner leader Evgeny Prigozhin crashes in Russia

Clara Weiss**24 August 2023**

A private jet that reportedly carried the leader of the Wagner mercenary group, Evgeny Prigozhin, along with six top commanders and three crew members, crashed on Wednesday, August 23, in the Russian Tver region. Everyone on board died in the crash.

Two months ago, on June 24-25, Prigozhin led a short-lived coup attempt against Putin and the army leadership, based on an appeal to pro-NATO factions in the Russian oligarchy. Prigozhin's Wagner troops had earlier played a central role in the war in Ukraine, which the Putin regime launched in February 2022 after years of imperialist provocations, based on the bankrupt conception that, through limited military action, it could force the imperialist powers to the negotiating table.

The passenger list released by Russia's aviation agency included, in addition to Prigozhin, Dmitri Utkin, a former member of Russia's military intelligence (GRU). Utkin is believed to have been the main founder and top commander of Wagner and was known to hold neo-Nazi views. Another leading Wagner figure on board was Valery Chekalov, who was reportedly in charge of managing both Prigozhin's personal security and Wagner's finances, which largely derived from state funds. The other four passengers were also leading Wagner commanders.

While the Kremlin has not officially confirmed that Prigozhin has died, Russian President Vladimir Putin released a video Thursday evening, offering his condolences to the family of the victims of the crash. The Russian president said that "if" the Wagner leaders had indeed "been on board," they should be remembered as "people who have made a substantial contribution to our common cause of fighting the neo-Nazi regime in Ukraine."

He added that he had personally known Prigozhin since the early 1990s and that he considered him, despite "serious mistakes," to have been a "talented man, a

talented businessman" who would yield "necessary results" whenever he had assigned him a task "for our common cause." Prigozhin, a fascistic figure and ex-convict, had previously been Putin's personal chef. For many years, he enjoyed the president's personal protection while building Wagner as a significant paramilitary force and business empire that turned Prigozhin into billionaire.

Despite earlier denunciations of Prigozhin and his supporters as "traitors," Putin met with Prigozhin and dozens of Wagner commanders just days after the insurrection, and the Kremlin effectively gave carte blanche to the organization in the weeks that followed. Wagner troops continue to operate in Africa on behalf of the Russian government, and on Monday, a Wagner recruitment video surfaced on the internet that appeared to show Prigozhin in a desert in Africa.

Wagner troops were also relocated to Belarus whose president, Alexander Lukashenko, had brokered a deal between Putin and Prigozhin during the coup attempt. In the wake of the failed coup attempt and the relocation of Wagner groups to Belarus, tensions have been growing between NATO member Poland and Belarus, with Poland substantially increasing its troops on the border with Belarus in recent weeks.

Despite the apparent reintegration of Wagner into the Kremlin's foreign and military policy, however, there are many indications that the infighting within the state and ruling class had continued. Also on Wednesday, hours before the plane crash, the Kremlin announced that General Sergei Surovikin was removed as the head of the Russian air force. Surovikin is considered the originator of the heavily mined Russian defense lines in Ukraine, which have managed so far to stall the NATO-backed counteroffensive. He was the best known supporter of Prigozhin in the army command and had not been seen since the coup attempt.

The causes of the plane crash remain unclear. The Kremlin is investigating the incident but has not provided an explanation. On Thursday, US officials declared that a preliminary investigation by US intelligence found that the crash was likely caused not by a surface-to-air missile, as had been initially reported, but by a bomb on board the aircraft.

The Ukrainian regime of Volodymyr Zelensky, which has engaged in multiple incursions of Russian territory and drone strikes on Moscow over the past months, immediately denied any involvement, suggesting that Putin was behind the crash. The Western media too has been quick to suggest that the plane was downed at the order of Vladimir Putin as a “revenge” for the coup attempt and a “message” that was meant for his rivals in the Russian oligarchy.

It can certainly not be excluded that the Putin regime, which arose out of the Stalinist bureaucracy’s destruction of the Soviet Union in 1991 and is steeped in the methods of gangsterism, or a section of the Russian state apparatus was behind the downing of the plane. However, it is far from the only possible version of events.

It must also be noted that the other cases that are frequently cited in the outlets like the *New York Times* as examples for previous alleged attempts by Putin to eliminate his political opponents—including the murder of Boris Nemtsov, and the alleged poisoning of Sergei Skripal and of the NATO-backed oppositionist Alexei Navalny—were not only part of the relentless anti-Putin and anti-Russian campaign leading up to the war but also highly dubious and never really clarified. The official media account of Navalny’s alleged Novichok poisoning in 2020, in particular, was so mired in contradictions as to be bordering on the ludicrous.

As for Prigozhin and the Wagner leadership, it is clear that they did not lack enemies inside or outside of Russia, and various political forces had an interest in seeing them dead.

It is noteworthy that early on in its coverage of the plane crash, the *Washington Post* drew attention to the Pentagon leaks earlier this year, which revealed discussions by the US, Ukraine and other “allies” about plots to eliminate Prigozhin. Based on the leaked document, the *Washington Post* reported in April that US airstrikes in February 2018 had killed several hundred Wagner fighters in Syria. Another US attack in Libya, where Wagner had also been destroyed, had “destroyed a Wagner logistics aircraft,” according to one leaked document. The *Post* wrote,

At a time when Wagner leader Yevgeniy Prigozhin has been preoccupied with Kremlin infighting over the paramilitary group’s deepening involvement in the war in Ukraine, U.S. officials depict Wagner’s expanding global footprint as a potential vulnerability.

One document in the trove lists nearly a dozen “kinetic” and other options that could be pursued as part of “coordinated U.S. and allied disruption efforts.” The files propose providing targeting information to help Ukraine forces kill Wagner commanders, and cite other allies’ willingness to take similar lethal measures against Wagner nodes in Africa.

Regardless of who and what was behind the downing of the plane, the death of much of the leadership of Wagner is set to further intensify the crisis of the Putin regime and the conflicts within the Russian oligarchy and state apparatus. Amidst the NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, these conflicts have themselves become a component of the warfare. The imperialist powers have long deliberately fueled the infighting within the oligarchy as part of their efforts to bring about a regime change in Moscow, which is itself a central war aim of Washington and Berlin.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* stressed in its statement on Prigozhin’s failed coup attempt, the crisis of the regime and the conflicts within the oligarchy are ultimately rooted in the very class character and historical origins of the ruling oligarchy in the Stalinist reaction against the 1917 October Revolution and the restoration of capitalism by the Soviet bureaucracy. Whatever their disagreements about foreign policy, all of the warring factions of the oligarchy fear nothing more than a movement in the working class and are, above all, concerned with safeguarding their assets and achieving, in one way or another, a settlement with the imperialist powers.



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